

# *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*

*Edited by* KEALA JEWELL



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Italian Literary Imagination*  






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Edited by Keala Jewell

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Monsters and Discourse on the Human*

KEALA JEWELL



How can we explain the undying presence of monsters in the cultural imagination, their persistence even in a modern epoch that scarcely believes in such creatures? And if we ever were to relinquish all fear of “them,” how might we imagine a post-monstrous world? Over the past five decades, philosophers, historians, and scholars of myth, literature, and art have begun to offer answers, some of them stunning, to these questions. There have been crucial advances in the study of how a social order is constructed by means of myriad representations—including monsters. These symbolic figurations—whether in literary texts, medical books, or popular pamphlets—have been shown to help produce the shapes, parameters, categories, and rules of “order.” Recently we have begun to look at monsters as discursive constructs, crucial to, in a nutshell, turning chaos into a cosmos.<sup>1</sup> Structuralist and poststructuralist scholars, together with theoreticians of “difference,” now examine what we call the “discourse” of the monstrous as a strategy through which cultures make sense of the world and legitimate their own conceptions of it.

One of the pioneering figures in this field of inquiry was the French historian of science Georges Canguilhem, who strongly influenced later preeminent historians and philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In a seminal essay written in the 1960s, Canguilhem initiated the study of monsters in the context of the social organization of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> He became fascinated with how representations of the unknown and the “abnormal” function to legitimate directions in inquiry and truth-seeking. In a masterful account of the changing meanings of two words, “monstrous” and “monstrosity,” Canguilhem illustrated how different historical epochs deployed the two terms in a series of juxtapositions. Focusing on the history of the biological sciences in the

nineteenth century, he scoured teratological treatises (“teras” being the Greek term for monster) for the traces of an emerging belief that everything to do with the “monstrous” belongs to the domain of childish fantasy, myth, and the cultural past, while “monstrosity” is, by contrast, a legitimate subject of scientific inquiry relevant to natural laws. From this perspective, monsters are simply abnormal beings produced by supposed genetic defects. For example, arrested development of a foetus could leave a human with fused legs—and that “real” monstrous medical condition might, in turn, explain the ancient myth of the mermaid. Abnormal doublings or triplings of limbs and organs, or reductions of them, might account for Cerberus or Cyclops. Consequently “monsters” turn into “monstrosities,” medical pathologies rather than prodigies.<sup>3</sup>

The advance of scientific teratology eventually begot the first embryological experiments designed to produce artificial monsters. These endeavors were meant to test the precise biological boundaries of the normal and the abnormal. For example, chick embryos were poked in just the right places to yield “x” and “y” monstrosities. Intrigued by the more bizarre fantasies of teratologists, Canguilhem noted a number of desperate attempts to produce, “scientifically,” monstrous furry birds or feathered rabbits. These exemplary moments in the history of science showed how a banned “monstrous” might find its way right back into inquiries into “monstrosity.” And Canguilhem found more than one biologist to be “en flagrant délit de surréalisme.”<sup>4</sup>

By foregrounding the contrast between modern and premodern discourse on monsters, Canguilhem brilliantly highlighted the fact that before the onset of scientific paradigms, monsters were an explicit and even honorable element of knowledge systems, of metaphysics and epistemology. But he also demonstrated that his method for studying the monstrous is applicable to the “mythic” and the “scientific” alike. Representations of the monstrous are symptomatic of how a culture conceives of inquiry and truth.

Monsters in fact are part of a tradition of discourse on the nature of enigma, the unknown, but also “reality,” as Corrado Bologna, among others, has pointed out.<sup>5</sup> Following this logic, we must assume that the presumed “real” and presumed “imaginary” are interdependent. Monsters become important nodes in the analysis of epistemology because they typically are situated somewhere between the known world and the imagined beyond. Monsters possess physical qualities, even animal ones, yet at the same time they possess supernatural qualities, such as uncommon strength or magical powers. Monstrous beings appear as present yet distant—in other “worlds” but pressing nearer. They are marginal to established social enclaves, standing at the borders of fearful and distant zones that humans cannot know—in woods, caves, sea-depths, or outer space. By virtue of their uncertain collocation and their indeterminate nature between human, animal, and divine, monsters can become “sites” of the negotiation of “real” social difference. They come in this way to stand for some abject enemy, some demonized neighbor, so that their transformations over the centuries might be linked to both historical change and conflicts between

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or within cultures. Thus discourse on monsters plays a significant function in cultural self-definition and provides useful clues to cultural valuations in general.

Canguilhem's work influenced scholars who were doing important work in forging the field of difference studies and developing the notion of the "discursive practice." Gilles Deleuze, the author of a critique of transcendental empiricism in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), wrote his dissertation with Canguilhem. He in turn trained a student who was to become an important theorist of the monstrous, the Italian Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti has expanded the field in several feminist works that seek to explain how the structural opposition male/female and self/other underlies the representation of monsters in both the philosophical and scientific traditions.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Ginevra Bompiani, represented in this collection of essays, has important ties with the Deleuzean school of thought. Indeed, all the contributors here might be regarded as working with the basic idea that monsters are a discourse that cannot be separated from sociocultural or religious practices. They study how, as Canguilhem put it, "monsters are called upon to legitimate a . . . vision of life."<sup>7</sup>

Canguilhem's verb "to legitimate" is fundamental in the essays which this collection groups. From the perspective I have been outlining, representations of monsters are defined in terms of a practice that is political in the broad sense of the term. A recent *Encyclopedia of Literary Thought* defines "discourse" as "the space and process where intersubjectivity is established, objects of knowledge pursued, and values assigned." Discourse is, as Mikhail Bakhtin asserted, a "modeling system" that makes sense of the world.<sup>8</sup> In this collection, monsters are broadly understood as part of a web of beliefs anchored in the epistemological constructs of various historical periods. Taken together, the essays here examine the ways in which monsters both inhabit certain symbolic spaces (ogres in forests, sirens in seas) and are prime "actants" in cultural narratives such as the epic poem, the gothic novel, or the thriller. From medieval monsters that populate the terrain of the *Inferno* to early modern witches who have intercourse with demonic beings, from sirens who threaten men not only with death but with untruth and illusion to electrically embalmed souls, monstrous beings are enigmas. When we explain them, we produce the knowledge that orders our worlds. The sphinx, the enigma par excellence, is in fact an important archetype.

The example of the mythic sphinx illustrates the kind of knowledge that monsters labor to produce. In a classic monster plot, the sphinx has usurped control over a human ordering, the city of Thebes. She stands threatening at its gates. Sphinx poses her riddle to Oedipus: what goes first on all fours, then on two legs, and then on three? Oedipus of course penetrates the enigma: the human being in the sequential phases of life—crawling baby, upright man, old man with a cane. Mastery over the human order, the polis, is regained, tellingly, through Oedipus's "knowledge" of human nature. If he defeats the monster, Oedipus achieves just what heroes should: mastery over a challenging, devouring "other." (In psychoanalytic theory, the fiction of mastery is, in a series of narcissistic identifications, the basis of the ego.<sup>9</sup>) However, the sphinx may

not be quite so different from the human, and in fact how could any projection of the human imagination ever be? The specularity of human and monster is clear in this myth, since the human appears to be just as multiplicitous as the sphinx with her triple animal nature. And here we move to some specifics of the functions of discourse on monsters. Monster myths are linked indissolubly to the definition of the "human."

The strict bond between monster myths and what we call "humanity" is a foremost concern of this collection, and this leads me to a discussion of the national literature which all the texts in the volume address, the Italian one. The reasons for the centrality of Italian literature to the topic of the monstrous are many. They run much deeper than Italy's ties to classical Greece and Rome, where mortals and demigods were recurrently dogged by monsters of mythic and epic memory. In each period of European history, Italian representations of monstrosity were central to dominant traditions of thought. Reconceptualizations of the monstrous mark major changes in the evolution of Italian philosophy and art. For example, the medieval period was characterized by a Christian renegotiation of classical, especially Neoplatonic, thought, and the idea of the monstrous played an important role in this phenomenon. Concerning the crucial revision of the concept of human knowledge (and hence also the human being) in this epoch, David Williams has recently observed that "Christian rhetoric is also the science that most emphatically underscores the limitations of human discourse as a means to understanding and representing the true nature of reality; consequently, the Middle Ages made deformity into a symbolic tool with which it probed the secrets of substance, existence, and form incompletely revealed by the more orthodox rational approach through dialectics."<sup>10</sup> Given the significance of this development, it comes as no surprise that our volume should offer three studies of Dante: two on the monsters of *The Divine Comedy* and one related to Dante's theories of language.

The Renaissance period also of course presents us with signal epistemological shifts. And Italy was the home of humanist philosophy. The term "humanist" has multiple meanings, with nuances important to our subject. In one sense, humanism refers simply to the study of pre-Christian classical authors and texts as against medieval, religious works. It is virtually synonymous with the term "Renaissance" because it defines a "new humanity"<sup>11</sup> on the basis of a recovery of truths of the classical world. Italian Renaissance culture produced an array of representations that bolstered notions of a grand and heroic human singularity, of human dignity, of a divine humanity at the center of the universe. But what exactly does it mean to put man at the center of the universe, to cast him also as the universal, the microcosm of the macrocosm? And how does this affect the discourse of the monstrous?

Several factors are pertinent to a resolution of these issues. For one, the rise of anthropocentric and secularizing thinking inevitably led to challenges to theologically based ontologies. In fact, in the early modern period the nature of human existence was the subject of enormous contention, and the

human/monstrous binary became a locus where a clash of cultures played itself out. Pico della Mirandola famously theorized the “dignity of man” in his *Oration*, basing this claim on his notion of an invaluable, near-monstrous human multiplicity and on what he saw as the related human gift for weaving together many truths about the cosmos, the world, and moral philosophy into one belief system. His views were of course heretical from the point of view of classic Christian theological conceptions of the hierarchy of being. As Walter Stephens’s essay here asserts, these traditional conceptions underwent a crisis that dramatically affected the social order and, logically, the discourse of the monstrous. The production of the “witch” figure, with its “demonization” of women’s bodies, was one of the effects. Witchcraft trials attempted, specifically, to prove that witches could copulate with demons and produce offspring. The witch’s intercourse with a world of demons and incubi could be taken as evidence of the reality of the supernatural. Clearly, witchcraft trials functioned to establish an enduring power for ontotheocracy.

The early modern period also witnessed a further stage in the process of defining the human faculty for “reason” that was accompanied by an emergent foundational discourse, with complex ramifications that once again bear on representations of the monstrous. Italy was influential in the rise of modern European culture not only because of philosophical humanism, but also because currents of political thought that emerged there sought to define modern “civil” society on the basis of a supposed rational order. Yet how reason and the “human” might overlap was, again, a much-contested question—especially in terms of the gendering and racializing of reason. To define humanity as dignified, civil, and rational did not mean that all humans were fully human. To give just one example of a discrepancy: throughout Europe dominant theoreticians of the monstrous believed that “irrational” women’s mental processes and the nature of their bodies differed from those of men and made them susceptible to intrusions of the monstrous. If a pregnant woman (no paragon of rationality here) saw or even fantasized about some animal, she could be physically “imprinted” by it and produce an unnaturally hairy baby, or one with hooves, and so on. This alleged phenomenon was dubbed “maternal imagination.” In a similar vein, the newly discovered indigenous peoples of the New World, considered monstrous races, became lesser “others,” whose inferior status legitimated the dominance of Europeans in the social order. The consequences of these discourses are all too obvious: the devaluation and monstification of a large percentage of “humanity.”

Scholarly interest in spotlighting the “underside” of the early modern period has led to fascinating new trends succinctly described in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature*. Recent scholarship clearly demonstrates both that “the dignity of men was founded on the exclusion of women” and that the “assumption about the self-determination of man has been reversed by several new approaches to human history: historians of sexuality, deconstructionists, and new historicists share, to various degrees, the belief that the entity of the

subject as the origin of action and of artistic creation is an illusion, and that in the text, literary or philosophical, the source of meaning is to be deferred to its context, rhetorical, ideological, and socioeconomic as it may be.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, because the notion of an exalted “Italian genius”<sup>13</sup> has been deconstructed, Italian thought and culture have now begun equally to nourish not only “Great Books” programs but university curricula in cultural studies as well.

In the centuries following the advent of humanism, Italian thought began, like European thought in general, to center on the “rights of man” and therefore to maintain the pressing necessity of defining humanity. It shared in the Enlightenment theorization of an inalienable humanness. The ideology of rights for man also implied, however, the lack of rights for some less-than-human others, such as criminals, who lost their claim to “humanity” when they lost “civil rights” and citizen status. The outlaw and the inhuman began to overlap. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has given us an important analysis of ways in which the monstrous, citizenship, and the lawful/unlawful binary came to be interrelated. Taking as his two points of departure Salic laws on the banning of murderers and legends about the fringe-dwelling werewolf in medieval (and later) culture, Agamben extended his considerations, in a seminal essay titled “Beyond Human Rights,” to refugees during the era of the nation-state. Inspired by Hannah Arendt, he writes in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*:

The conception of human rights based on the supposed existence of a human being as such, Arendt tells us, proves to be untenable as soon as those who profess it find themselves confronted for the first time with people who have really lost every quality and every specific relation except for the pure fact of being human. In this system of the Nation-State, the so-called sacred and inalienable human rights are revealed to be without any protection precisely when it is no longer possible to conceive of them as rights of the citizens of a State. This is implicit, after all, in the ambiguity of the very title of the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, in which it is unclear whether the two terms are to name two distinct realities or whether . . . the first term is actually always already contained in the second.<sup>14</sup>

Agamben’s work cited here is an example of a politicizing questioning of the heritage of medieval and humanist traditions. And it is one among several critiques, from different quarters, of humanism’s aims, its privileges, and its exclusions. The “politics of the monstrous” that specific cultures develop are now being studied as part and parcel of a system of differences that inevitably creates outcasts. The development in recent decades of difference theory is, I have noted, central to study of the monstrous. Agamben’s admiration for the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, to whom he dedicated a book, is significant in this regard.

In the 1960s, structuralist thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss approached imaginary monsters as symbolic composites produced by the tendency of all cultures to classify one domain of knowledge and inquiry by modeling it on another system of differences often found often in Nature. Thus animal totems, for instance, reflect one culture's close observations of biological differences among animals and its organization of creatures into classes. That classificatory knowledge is then used to organize kinship structures (cf. *La pensée sauvage*). In this way, the seemingly irrational composite nature of the monster turns out to have a logic, and that logic is a means of founding a social order. Philologists and philosophers of language pursued this line of inquiry and fruitfully seized on the symbolic processes at work in representations of monstrosity as evidence of the inventive power of language and thought to articulate cultural symbols. These in turn were examined for their roles in various social and ritual functions. The study of monsters consequently expanded in many directions, catching the interest of such distinguished figures as Émile Benveniste and Jacques Derrida, and classicists Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant.<sup>15</sup> These studies consistently put into relief the way that the human subject itself is constructed in discursive practices.

This interest in the monstrous is virtually inseparable from what we call, using shorthand, "anti-humanist" philosophy. The term expands to designate a critique not of early modern definitions but of Western metaphysics itself from the Greeks forward. There, to cite Heidegger in Williams's translation, the human being or "subject" gains an epistemological and ontological centrality not circumscribed to Renaissance notions of human protagonism: "The more completely the world appears accessible as world controlled, the more the object appears objective, the more the subject appears subjective—that is to say peremptory—and the more irresistible the contemplation of the world, the more theory of the world becomes a theory of man—an anthropology."<sup>16</sup> In the opinion of many, postmodern discourse itself can be equated to a challenge to this humanist (in the Heideggerian sense) notion of subjectivity as it is constructed in the tradition of Western metaphysics. Teresa Ebert writes:

Postmodern feminist cultural theory breaks with the dominant humanist view . . . in which the subject is still considered to be an autonomous individual with a coherent, stable self constituted by a set of natural and pre-given elements such as biological sex. It theorizes the subject as produced through signifying practices which precede her and not as the originator of meaning. One acquires specific subject positions—that is, existence in meaning, in social relations—being constituted in ideologically structured discursive acts. Subjectivity is thus the effect of a set of ideologically organized signifying practices through which the individual is situated in the world and in terms of which the world and one's self are made intelligible.<sup>17</sup>

If postmodernism challenges the received idea of the “human,” then it also must challenge representations of the monstrous, for, as Williams observes, in a “world which has become a human ‘concept,’ the marginalization of the monster is essential.”<sup>18</sup> How does this challenge play itself out? First of all, it has been necessary to study just how monsters intersect with “marginalization.” This question began to be addressed in the mid-1960s and the 1970s, when philosophers and literary critics became interested in monsters not just as objective features of a certain culture but as key clues to the ideological underpinnings of a social system based on defining a (humanist) self against devalued “others.” In those decades monsters began to be seen broadly as instrumental in the workings of social branding, intolerance, prejudice, racism, and misogyny. Theorists demonstrated that representations of the monstrous foster a social containment of diversity as well as provide the foundation for social conceptualizations, categorizations, and order. This kind of theory informed Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966), where the philosopher/historian studied early challenges to the traditions of Western humanism and dared to declare the “death of Man.” Cutting-edge feminists began intensively to theorize the containment of diversity and the cultural constructs that allow it. Italian feminists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Adriana Cavarero (whose ideas are engaged in Barbara Spackman’s essay in this volume), and Rosi Braidotti have underscored what is at stake for women in received representations of sexual difference, and they have fruitfully linked the “monstrous” with Western philosophy’s founding of subjectivity on the basis of that difference.

The essays collected here take into account the lines of inquiry described above, extending their scope to include anthropology, mythography, philology, and the kinds of analyses traditionally associated with the rhetorical and literary traditions. The volume gives evidence of the ways in which thinkers in the United States and Italy have drawn from an important interdisciplinary tradition and have also brought new perspectives to it by circumscribing the field of inquiry and examining the specific case of Italian literature, a literature so rich with monsters. The essays in this volume have been divided according to four fundamental avenues into the topic of the monstrous: 1) modern horrors; 2) monsters and conception; 3) monsters and poetics; and 4) monsters as discourse.

The first four essays in the collection treat texts, literary and cinematic, in which the instability of the modern worldview is taken for granted and the crisis of humanism is in full swing. Male hegemony founders. The distinctness and separateness of each human subject’s body is seen as uncertain, its boundaries threatened by violation. Authority over the human body is contested in narratives that invoke mad scientists, perverse doctors, serial killers, and incubi. In the opening essay, I analyze Alberto Savinio’s retelling of the Eros and Psyche myth in *La nostra anima*, reading the modern tale not as the usual “allegory of the soul” but instead as the allegory of the post-humanist soul. In this revised tale, the mortal Psyche rejects the god she has married because he turns out to be a monster. In leaving him, she also refuses both transcendence

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and the authority of a male deity. I find in this text the clear consciousness of the shift, described by Canguilhem, from discourses of the monstrous to discourses of monstrosity in modernity. In my view, *La nostra anima* depicts a series of monsters and supposed experts on them in order to bring into relief a fundamental fact: in modernity Western myths concerning human “knowledge” of the unknown have been irrevocably challenged, and founding representations no longer provide structural supports for Western metaphysics—when, in short, “God is dead.” The “modern” monstrous is also connected to the upheavals of modernization and changing cultural mythologies that produce new gods who are not recognized as such. In this context I analyze the marriage theme inherent in the Eros and Psyche tale and consider Savinio’s debunking of gender myths, especially the deification of males. Just as Savinio deplors patriarchal representations of the human, he also attacks any apotheosis of the feminine. I view Savinio’s text as influenced by the specter of the separatist sexual politics ostensibly put forward by feminist movements in the twentieth century. I also highlight racist paradigms that subtend Savinio’s figurations of monstrosity.

Nancy Harrowitz also studies the theme of monstrosity in the context of modern science. Her contribution treats Primo Levi’s depiction of an evil science in his collection of short texts entitled *Natural Stories*. These explore the sensitive and problematic relationship between the practice of modern science and society as a whole. One particular tale, “Angelica Farfalla” (Angelic Butterfly), can be read as a metaphor for the “evil science” the Holocaust perpetuated in genocidal racial policies and in inhumane research on human subjects: a scientist turns victims into half-human, half-animal monsters in order to prove a theory of metamorphosis. Harrowitz argues that Levi writes this monster story in order to demonstrate the dangers of “an exercise of unbridled scientific imagination.” In her view, the author uses a discourse of monstrosity as a method of exploring and reading scientific epistemology and its relation to scientific ethics and politics.

The destabilization of gender mythologies is the subject of Jacqueline Reich’s study of Dario Argento’s horror films. Reich undertakes a review of recent theories of horror as they relate to a cultural imagination that makes women monstrous. The figure of the witch in Argento’s opus is carefully placed within the horror film genre, one that is steeped in issues of sexual difference. In Reich’s opinion, Argento deploys Sabbath rituals, alchemy, sorcery, possession, and supernatural events in highly strategic ways related to an “instability of masculinity.” In updating the Gothic lairs and labyrinths brimming with cats and malevolent creatures that traditionally set the stage for witchcraft horror, Argento does much more than update gender myths in the direction of a transgressive “gender-bending” noted by other critics. The displays of butchery in Argento’s films must be read, Reich argues, in the context of a threat of female autonomy that, for example, calls forth a storm of revenge upon women in Argento’s cult film *Suspiria*.

Monstrous murders are also the subject of Ellen Nerenberg’s study of contemporary Italian “pulp” or “splatter” fiction. In these works, as in horror

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films, violence allegorizes a threat to a symbolic order, and the monster brings about the violent encounter—as Barbara Creed has noted in her study of the feminine and horror.<sup>19</sup> To illustrate the diffusion of real murders and the literary topos of serial killers in tandem, Nerenberg engages in a close reading of press articles about the accused “sex monster” Pietro Pacciani and a number of detective novels set in different parts of Italy (sex murders in Bologna and a set of murders of fashion models in Milan). Significantly, the murderers found in the works of the authors Carlo Lucarelli and Andrea Pinketts sport a collection of grotesqueries: they are variously pedophiles, dwarfs, and sexual deviants. Symbolic violations of the body, and the symbolic order, are the norm in a series of stabbings, mutilations, and skinings that stump even savvy, postmodern flatfoots. Nerenberg explores in these circumstances a contradiction that plagues Italian cultural self-fashioning: If it is presumed that Italy is a place where violent crime is virtually unheard of, and the whole idea of it is comfortably transposed into “safe” fictions like best-selling detective novels, then how is cultural difference encoded at all? How is Italian discourse on monstrosity different from “global” and “transnational” horror, which seems to move so easily across national boundaries in the works of Clive Barker, Stephen King, and Quentin Tarantino? The “fetishizing of skin” becomes for Nerenberg the sign of a disturbed body politic.

Part 2, “Monsters and Conception,” groups essays that focus attention on the reproductive body as a privileged sign of monstrosity in the Western tradition at least since Aristotle, who considered the female an abnormal form of the male. Some of the most convincing scholarship on monsters has delved into this particular discourse of monstrosity. The authors in this section analyze representations of a female body that is at once metamorphic (especially in gestation), subject to decay, and abject. But the female body is also viewed in its role in mythic narratives—and particularly in religious discourse. This approach is necessary because sexual difference and narratives about it, including erotic and reproductive ones, are building blocks of systems of signs that are functional to the production of a social order. Along these lines, Naomi Yavneh represents the feminist viewpoint that the threat of female sexuality plays an important role in Dante’s depiction of monsters in general and sirens in particular in *The Divine Comedy*. She examines medieval gynecological treatises along with the exegetical writings of church fathers and Dante’s classical sources and argues that female monsters suggest the menace of a desire which refuses to look beyond the corporeal; tainted by Eve’s sin, even the most beautiful female body is as foul as the stinking belly Dante’s siren reveals to the pilgrim in a dream. Ultimately, the siren is revealed to be the antithesis of the Virgin Mary, whose redemptive and immaculate womb is the anti-type and the antidote to the siren’s womb and to all corporeal desire.

Gary Cestaro has also elected to study Dante through the topic of the female body. He considers the figure of the woman as nurse and the female breast in the context of the medieval rejection of a nurturing female corporeality. In this



mythic construct, the woman's nursing, nurturing body must be left behind if the human being is to achieve a mature rationality predicated solely upon culture—and not the body. Cestaro asserts that Dante positions the nurse's body in an uneasy liminal space—at once a source of quasi-mystical truth and a perilous threat to the social order. The nurturing body inhabits the medieval imagination as a monster: site of signifying excess, cherished teacher and advisor, dreaded, wondrous omen of extra-rational collapse (*monstrum*). Cestaro extends his analysis to Dante's way of allegorizing grammar as a nursing female body. Thus grammar—the first of the arts, the very source of linguistic regulation, gateway to Latin culture and patriarchal society—traced its origins to female nurturing. Yet, Cestaro notes, the most significant late medieval treatments of grammar construct a curious symbolic hybrid, present in Dante, in which a seated woman offers one breast for suckle while covering the other with a rod or whip. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theories of subjectivity, Cestaro examines this contradictory way of thinking of grammar in conjunction with Dante's own theory of how a speaking subject enters the symbolic and linguistic process.

In an essay on the theory of witchcraft, Walter Stephens turns his attention to Torquato Tasso and the theme of the female body as a sign whose meanings are generated in a complicated set of socioreligious references. Concentrating on the notion that witches had sexual intercourse with devils at Sabbaths and might produce unnatural offspring from these couplings, Stephens draws from primary Renaissance texts in the areas of theology, law, and science to shed light on how theories of the nature of the witch not only “demonized” women but also made it possible to “anthropomorphize” demons. From the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, he argues, the body of the witch was important to learned Europeans, primarily as a site for proving the reality of the spirit world: on the corporeal reality and sexual viability of witches' demonic paramours hinged the epistemological and ontological validity of Western Christianity. The societal consequences of this demonic theology were of course grave for the women and men accused of and tried for witchcraft. But the discourse of witchcraft theory reveals a theological crisis alongside and underneath the societal atrocity, which helps explain why learned and erudite men— theorists or theoreticians in the fully modern sense—subscribed to such “old wives' tales.”

Part 3 collects the largest number of essays in this volume, under the rubric “Monsters and Poetics.” These essays examine the intersections of language, aesthetics, and epistemology by focusing on the associations between the monstrous on the one hand and the rhetorical- and genre-based constructs such as metaphor, the grotesque, the comic, and the marvelous on the other. Here forms of discourse such as the fairy tale or the nineteenth-century novel, with their mixture of fantastic and realistic elements, are studied as polymorphous creations that often incarnate monstrosity in their very forms. Through her reading of the monsters that appear in Dante's *Inferno*, Virginia Jewiss examines how the theme of the monstrous inevitably engages aesthetic questions. She applies

theories of critical inquiry about the presence of monstrous figures in medieval manuscript illumination to Dante's way of structuring the journey through the "beyond." The poet encounters monsters, Jewiss argues, at moments of structural or topological transition and thus at thresholds. While seeming to hinder the progress of Dante and Virgil, the monsters actually become modes of transportation: Dante rides the monsters toward his salvation. In this sense, they are figures of confrontation and mediation who participate in rather than oppose God's plan; the monstrous is incorporated into Dante's ethical and aesthetic vision as a mode of facilitation. Thus Dante's use of monsters is closely related to the poetic trope of metaphor, which traditionally is defined in terms of motion and displacement. Jewiss ultimately links Dante's use of monstrous figures to his poetic and theological understanding of the metaphoric, showing how his poem and his salvation depend on and unfold through monsters.

Antonella Ansani argues that the monstrous as a theme converges with linguistic subversion in the Italian literary heritage. She makes her point in a close study of Bartolotti's farcical, fifteenth-century chronicle of the extraordinary character, life, and deeds of a quack. The chronicle is written in macaronic Latin, an artificial, hybrid language that blends classical Latin morphology with lexical and syntactic structures of northern Italian dialects. Latin inflections are added to Italian or dialect stems, while in turn Latin words are intentionally italianized. In macaronic poetry the three tongues are not merely juxtaposed; they wholly merge, generating a highly sophisticated linguistic monster. The linguistic subversion of macaronic poetry is paralleled by a series of intentional deformations and reversals of classical subjects and conventions. The most transgressive aspect of this poetry is the representation of the grotesque, monstrous body described in all its most obscene functions. Ansani's essay includes a critique of Bakhtin's well-known opposition between the grotesque and the classical bodies.

Suzanne Magnanini, while studying Girolamo Parabosco's *L'Hermafrodito*, also studies a literary genre—the hybrid comedy—in the context of a monstrous figure: the hermaphrodite. Parabosco's prologue adopts the language of sexual reproduction and, specifically, of monstrous generation, Magnanini tells us, to describe literary production. She considers a large number of teratological theories—the work of the Florentine humanist Benedetto Varchi on the "prophetic" nature of monsters, anatomical treatises on monstrous abnormalities, and religious texts—in conjunction with the comedy in order to illuminate what she calls an "abnormal process of composition." In this way, the play can be seen to offer itself as the locus for changing dramatic theory.

In an essay on ogres and fools in the fairy tales of Basile, Nancy Canepa gives us a vision of the literature of the seventeenth century, when the aesthetic canon began greatly to expand to include the grotesque, the ugly, the common, and human and animal anomalies. Canepa treats the figure of an imaginary, semi-human monstrous being—the ogre—in *Lo cunto de li cunti*, the first framed collection of literary fairy tales to appear in Europe. Here the ogre comes

to inhabit a realm of relative, ambivalent monstrosity in which he—or she—becomes a part of a general critique of court society and the canonical literary tradition. Ogres consistently appear as humane, if not entirely human, beings that are conscious of their status as outsiders and of what they are outside of: the world of kings, princesses, and their courts. This “demonstrification” suggests the erasure of clear-cut boundaries between social and ethical categories and diverse literary traditions. Moreover, the description of the ogre most clearly highlights Basile’s use of wholesale monstrosity or grotesque deviation from literary and linguistic norms. Indeed the sage but marginalized ogre is an apt metaphor for the kind of literature that brings back to “civilization” a wealth of material from the “popular” tradition.

Robert Dombroski also engages the ideological significance of revising monstrous discourse, in this case Alessandro Manzoni’s blend of fiction and history in his novel *I promessi sposi*. Dombroski argues that Manzoni explores, in a move that parallels but re-dimensions Basile’s paradoxical twinning of demonstrification and intertextuality, “the fusion of different realms of being” potentially threatening the “harmony” that literary works are expected to achieve in their form and to foster in social terms. After outlining the literary context of Manzoni’s approach to the grotesque, Dombroski analyzes Manzoni’s use of linguistic pastiche as well as what he calls “scenes of the grotesque” (a banquet, public calamities, an imprisonment) in order to understand how Manzoni constructs “unreason” as a monster tamed by Catholic morality. Dombroski uncovers parodies not of seventeenth-century “baroque” monsters that typified the age in which the historical novel is set but, instead, of Manzoni’s own age and the nineteenth-century Romantic gothic genre. Dombroski locates Manzoni’s strategy of “containment” of monstrous phenomena that terrorize the social order in the novel’s parody of the apparatus of horror and the plots that accompany it (dungeons and imprisonment). In Dombroski’s view, the gothic discourse of monstrosity can be associated with the threat to social harmony posed by an unruly urban proletariat, although Manzoni’s novel works to contain this threat as it appears in the specific social and class order of Italy in the nineteenth century. Manzoni’s work thus needs to be read against the grain of the hegemonic gothic discourse. Dombroski contends that this kind of reading, inspired in part by the work of Franco Moretti, will yield a villain (the “innominato”) who is in fact an anti-Dracula. The non-vampiric, non-bloodsucking character who converts to Christianity is evidence not only of the specific historical development of capital in Italy but of Manzoni’s “reforming” of the monster.

Part 4, “The Monster as Discourse,” gathers important contributions to a field of inquiry that dates back to the 1960s and the work of Canguilhem and his students. Ginevra Bompiani undertakes an explicitly political analysis of the monster-as-outcast, and her essay demonstrates the usefulness of the broad approach in addressing the topic of the monstrous. Bompiani understands the monstrous to be a means of differentiating and branding uprooted and displaced

peoples, and therefore she titles her piece "The Monster as a Refugee." She analyzes the social and literary production of "social monsters" made out to be hybrid in nature, while simultaneously searching out "good" monsters in literature and painting—those which are the fruit of respect for hybridity's inclusions of what is different and geographically "beyond." Although the defining textual example she gives comes from Anna Maria Ortese's book *L'Iguana* about an imaginary iguana/woman, at the same time her work enters into a dialogue with the work of Deleuze.

In his essay on Giambattista Vico, Massimo Riva addresses directly the question of the monstrous and the "humanist" heritage. Studying how the monster in Vico appears as the "interface" of Nature and culture, Riva finds that Vico's thought on monsters is an authentic archetype of the inner dialectic of the Enlightenment. In it two irreconcilable strains of ideas about the nature of monsters coexist. They are "explainable" as native wisdom, and therefore they can be seen to display the imaginative power that shaped them; they are the embodiment of notions and ideas that "civilized" peoples express in abstract, rational terms. Monsters belong then to primitive thinking. At the same time, monsters in Vico are the embodiment of a different logic, or of a logic of difference, one that can neither be thoroughly explained nor translated into our "abstract" thinking because it simply does not obey the same rules. Monsters inscribe a logic qualitatively different from rational thought. We will never outgrow monsters, Riva argues; we must remain forever connected to our own "primitive" poetic mind and imagination as if by an umbilical cord. One might define these two strains as the Enlightenment and Romantic views of the monstrous. Our contemporary attitude to monsters combines fascination with and revulsion toward monsters as creatures marked by this fundamental ambivalence. Thus any consideration of contemporary humanism will, Riva asserts, have to take into account the topic of the monstrous.

In a discussion of "monstrous knowledge," Barbara Spackman considers the questions of marginalization, exclusion, and the monstrous "outcast" from the viewpoint of women as opposed to "humanity." In this essay, which closes the volume, Spackman incorporates the work of feminist critics in order to examine discourses of the monstrous as an ambivalent cultural heritage that entails much more than the prevalence of a female grotesque. In her view, ideologies of sexual difference inform the human/monstrous binary with consequences for women that are only now beginning to be explored. Women are not simply the "other" of males in the Western cultural imaginary. They are, in a more complex configuration, the "other" of a "neutral" "humanity." In Western epistemology, the male is linked to transcendent "mental" knowledge; by representing the female as embodied, the male subject can carve out a position that transcends gender itself. As Adriana Cavarero has argued, the universal subject of knowledge is, paradoxically, both male and neuter at once. From the point of view of feminism, the "universal" subject is itself therefore fully monstrous. Following Elizabeth Grosz, Spackman examines the possibility of

opening up new discursive spaces in a reorganization of our ways of knowing. She does this through a detailed analysis of Maria Corti's novel *Il canto delle sirene* (The Sirens' Song), a text in which Spackman uncovers a crucial symbolic configuration: the coupling of monstrosity with female knowledge. Exploring the possibility of female knowledge in Corti, Spackman finds that a female writer may very well produce both sirens and ostensible "anti-sirens" without revising the position of the male/neuter subject. In fact, if the humanistic model of subjectivity is to be abandoned, this will, we might surmise, entail a post-monstrous world.

In sum, this group of essays as a whole engages issues of great critical interest in the United States and abroad: the symbolic heritage and its role in creating and maintaining ideologies of difference, the nature of symbolic representation itself, and the evolution of Western epistemology in its underlying politics of monstrosity.

### Notes

1. J. Brun formulated this notion ("Le monstre est un être repassé par le chaos pour refaire un cosmos") in "Le prestige du monstre," cited in Giovanna Cerina, "Archetipi fiabeschi: metamorfosi mostri labirinti," in *Metamorfosi Mostri Labirinti: Atti del seminario di Cagliari, 22-24 gennaio 1990*, ed. G. Cerina, M. Domenichelli, P. Tucci, and M. Viridis (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), p. 35.
2. Georges Canguilhem, "La monstrosité et le monstrueux," *Diogenes* 40 (1963): 29-43.
3. See Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present* No. 92 (1981): 20-54, here p. 23.
4. Canguilhem, "Monstrosité," p. 40.
5. Corrado Bologna, "Mostro," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).
6. For the most complete study, see Rosi Braidotti, *Madri, mostri e macchine* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1996). I would like to thank Braidotti for informing me of Canguilhem's work.
7. Canguilhem, "Monstrosité," p. 37.
8. Marie-Christine Leps, "Discourse," in *Encyclopedia of Literary Thought: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 535-36.
9. See Marie-Claire Boons-Grafé, "Other/other," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 297.
10. David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), p. 3.
11. For a short explanation, see Patrizia Landi, "Umanesimo," in *Enciclopedia Garzanti di filosofia*, ed. Lamberto Boni (Milan: Garzanti, 1981), pp. 955-57.
12. Fiora Bassanese, "Renaissance," in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature*, ed. Rinaldina Russell (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 285.

13. For an analysis of Italian male "genius" in this context, see Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
14. Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 159–65, here pp. 161–62.
15. See Emile Benveniste, "Le vocabulaire latin des signes et des présages," in *Le vocabulaire des institutions indoeuropéennes, II. Pouvoir, droit, religion* (Paris: Minuit, 1969); Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967); Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence: La métis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).
16. Martin Heidegger, "Chemins," cited in Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 330.
17. Teresa Ebert, "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory," *Cultural Critique* 10 (1988): 19–57, here pp. 22–23. Cited in Henry Giroux, "Introduction: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism: Rethinking the Boundaries of Educational Discourse," in *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*, Henry A. Giroux, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 29–30.
18. Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 326.
19. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

PART ONE

# *Modern Horrors*





# CHAPTER 1

## *Creatures of Difference: Myths of Monstrosity in Savinio's La nostra anima*

KEALA JEWELL



The soul is a *political* matter.

Alberto Savinio, *New Encyclopedia*

### Monsters and the Refiguration of Myth

Alberto Savinio's short novel *La nostra anima* (Our Soul) (1944) is a modern version of the tale of Eros and Psyche that recasts a long-lived, culturally authoritative story of the love between a mortal and an immortal being. Following illustrious predecessors, the modern author brings to the Greek myth the notion that Psyche's story of union with a deity is an allegory of the soul, of "la nostra anima." Post-classical texts using the Psyche myth have largely been Christian allegories; yet Savinio's twentieth-century tale cannot be read in this way. It utterly reverses the original story: Psyche does not gain immortality from Olympus at all. Savinio writes a pastiche boldly *recalling* the power in the Western cultural imagination of mythic tales of love that illustrate the "continuity" between humans and immortals, yet *rejecting* that tie as it has been conceived in the past. Drawing from the Greeks, Apuleius, Firenzuola, and in general on the strategy of the allegorization of Psyche, Savinio converts her story into a sacrilegious tale of domination and rupture when his Psyche learns that Eros is a devious monster. The god appears in Savinio's revised representation as, indeed, a cross between a monstrous, metamorphic phallus and a bird (a play on the Italian "uccello" for "prick" and on ancient iconographies).

Extensively citing the tradition, the author effects a blasphemous demythologizing, setting his work apart from that of others who also "reread" the myth in modern terms, such as Sir James George Frazer and Otto Weininger.<sup>1</sup> In Savinio's view, human cultures appear tirelessly to create new imaginary "architectures" to represent particular ways of being, and these are eternally pressed into the service of those who wield power. Whether they appear in



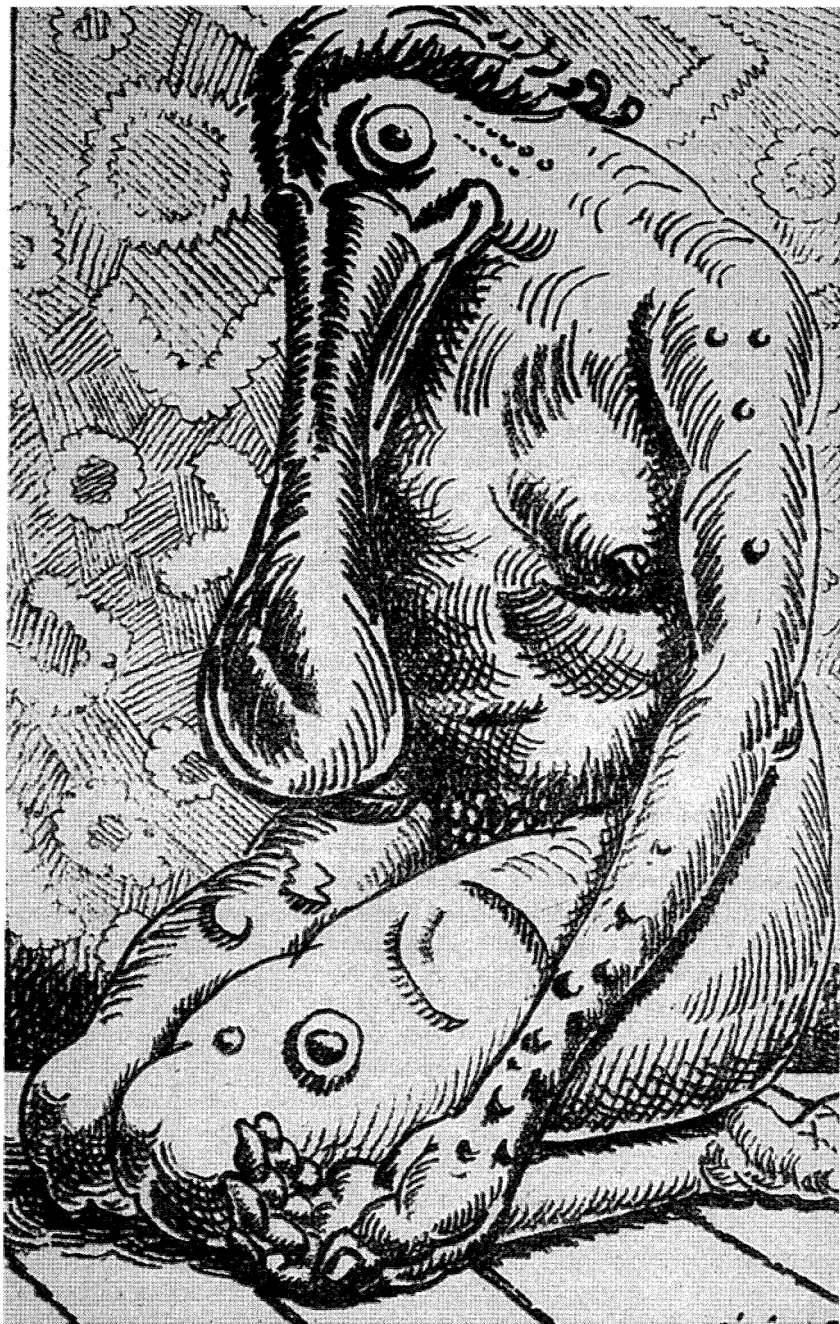
Savinio's lithograph "Amore" [Eros], from the first edition of *La nostra anima* (printed by Roberto Bullo, Documento Editore, Rome, 1944).

literature, myth, or propaganda, spatial representations evolve in which the present, physical world and the immortal “after world” can be imagined to be contiguous. Plots are articulated that can actively shape the conception of commerce between these topoi. Savinio has his Psyche savagely wrench mythic architectures and narratives into new shapes: instead of a marriage story between a mortal and an immortal in a celestial palace, Psyche narrates her great disgust with a grotesque deity. In a shocking new “divorce” myth, she will dump a god.

Given the challenge in secular modernity to the idea of the immortal soul, it will come as no surprise that Psyche and her immortal spouse will, in Savinio’s tale, inhabit a singularly modern and dislocated space. The astounding story is told by a phantom Psyche, who appears to a select set of interlocutors in an updated wax museum in 1917 in Salonika.<sup>2</sup> Savinio’s modern myth unfolds in a bizarre “new Musée Grévin,”<sup>3</sup> visited by a soldier named Nivasio Dolcemare during the First World War. Nivasio and Perdita, his mistress, are accompanied on their tour of the establishment by the museum director, a local Jewish doctor named Sayas (“israelita di razza e medico chirurgo” [of the Israelite race and a medical surgeon]).<sup>4</sup> In what is called a “fleshworks,” Nivasio hears a tale of disillusioned love from an electrically embalmed Psyche—a being of pure appearance. Savinio’s heroine appears—in this *illusion* of a soul—as a woman with a pelican’s head and beak, and thus as a traditional monster. Yet when Savinio makes her shocked horror at her husband’s nature the climax of his tale, he provides his readers with a blatantly post-metaphysical, antitraditional rendition of the relation of mortals and immortals. What happens to Western myth when human “knowledge” of the unknown is challenged and “God is dead”?

To signal the difference between what human knowledge of the “unknown” can be in modernity, Savinio draws on a tradition of representation that, like spatial symbols such as the celestial palace or sacred mount, has always been associated with metaphysics and epistemology: that of the monstrous. Monsters in this tradition articulate a discourse about the nature of enigma, the unknown, and reality in mythologemes depicting sirens, sphinxes, minotaurs, and their kin. In rewriting the myth of Eros and Psyche, and thus the relation of humanity to an otherworldly deity, Savinio deploys monsters in highly strategic ways. The myth in fact tells the story of a curious woman who dares to “know” the unknowable. In this modern version, she has been forbidden to gaze on her husband Eros, but she defies his will. As he sleeps, she shines a lamp on him, discovering a monster, not a god. The tale seems therefore to be a story of liberation from the deity through disillusion. It figures the loss of a comfortable position for the human being in the universe, and a redirecting of the human search for knowledge.

In both his writing and his painting, Savinio insists on the subjects of home and family as symbols of a new positionality for the human being. Throughout history, he writes, imagination lovingly has tailored a place for humanity. Myths have created a human universe/home, and relations to gods



Savinio's lithograph "Psiche" [Psyche], from the first edition of *La nostra anima* (printed by Roberto Bullo, Documento Editore, Rome, 1944).

who are parents, husbands, and wives. In one of the most persistent of mythic narrations, woman is herself a “home” to man. Ontotheocracy gives us, in other words, a divinely ordained order and a way of being rooted in the universe.<sup>5</sup> And the “soul” as an idea was the flower of human desire and the human faculty of invention.<sup>6</sup> With modernity, however, the foundations of the ontotheocratic world began slipping. Humans learned that disciples and imitators of superior beings must submit to the authority of these superior beings, beings of their own creation. We became convinced we could make it on our own and throw off an evil dominator—the deity refigured as a monster.

Within this history of the demise of ontotheocracy, and especially of the notion of utopia, Savinio poses several further questions crucial in *La nostra anima*. Have we really made our souls our own by deicide (“God is dead”)? Or is the very notion of the sacrosanct, individual, “separatist” soul in any case the remnant of a dualist metaphysics that defined two distinct spheres, the human and the otherworldly, the mortal and immortal? Can we ever be totally and exclusively human if we “defeat” the deity? Might not the dualism that governed Western metaphysics also work to bind together, to associate, the two terms that remain paired even if they are contraries? After all, separate sides are *linked* by negation.<sup>7</sup> And are both the “deity” and the “human” remnants of concepts and myths woven over history into even the modern cultural imagination?

For Savinio, this reweaving of remnants into a new imaginary texture is the hallmark of human culture, and the interweaving of cultural contraries is especially significant. Savinio gives us an example of his outlook when he explains that the modern world is a place of violent conflict in part because some people believe in an Einsteinian curvature of space while others still have faith in geocentrism.<sup>8</sup> Because of this extreme combination, modernity itself can be represented as monstrous, a fact at the heart of Savinio’s literary and pictorial production from his first work, *Hermaphrodito* (1918), forward. Savinio’s own teratological creations tend, as a consequence of his views, to dramatize shifting paradigms and the changing conceptions of the world.

Another corollary of Savinio’s critique of metaphysics is the conviction that cultural struggle defines revisions of monster myths, and his textual strategies are affected accordingly at many levels. The idea of cultural clashes is often recast into an individual character’s biography, seen as a struggle to assimilate competing and contrasting worldviews, and the character Nivasio Dolcemare embodies this allegorical tendency (he returns in Savinio’s prose over a period of more than thirty years). The volume *Narrate uomini la vostra storia* is another example.<sup>9</sup> Individuals and cultures alike are depicted there as grappling with the unconscious of language and with remnants of their past mythologies. We tend to forget, for example, that our planet revolves around the sun (and not the other way around) because we constantly say that the “sun has set.” Similarly, modernity’s monsters may still “speak” ancient cosmologies and myths that persist in the present.

In brief, there is a good deal more at stake in *La nostra anima* than

revealing the monstrosity of a god. Savinio suggests that monsters are necessary to cultural self-definition. And he sets out, I shall argue, to create a narrative that might be called “meta-monstrous”—to design a discourse that is really about monster-making in the abstract. Yet Savinio’s own enterprise cannot be viewed as a purely theoretical one. What I shall call his “competing monsters” reveal to us much about the author’s political and moral valuations of modernity as well as his own participation in the production of ideology. My discussion begins with the subject of modern gender identity as it intersects with Savinio’s discourse on the monstrous, moves on to Savinio’s treatment of modern scientific thinking, and concludes with an analysis of what I understand to be the “unsaid” in Savinio’s theorization of monstrosity in modernity.

### Sexual Difference and Metaphysics

The power of Western culture lies in part in the dominance of its mythic narrations. And Savinio, for one, would like to see that power fade. In his view, modern Europe retained elements of ontotheocracy that spawned Nazism and Fascism—namely the replacement of gods by humans who become the new dictators.<sup>10</sup> Why does the story of Psyche serve his purposes? It is central precisely because ontotheocracies rely on stories of erotic desire and sexual union to figure the continuous relations between mortals and immortals, humans and deities, the known and the unknown. Savinio’s *La nostra anima*, written in 1944, during World War II, can be seen therefore to put into play, first, the question of human relations to the deity, and second, the relations of citizens to those who wield political power. And while Savinio foregrounds modernity’s general disunity and its inherent hybridity, he also examines within modern thought specific cultural drives toward recovering some unitarian vision. He dismisses those who are trying to patch up the Western “edifice” and praises anti-dualists or “pre-Socratics”: “I call Pre-Socratic anyone who does not think in the dualist manner (physical and metaphysical, matter and spirit, body and soul, human and divine, terrestrial and celestial).”<sup>11</sup>

*La nostra anima* inscribes more specific issues within this general anti-dualist polemic. Foremost among them is gender dualism as a foundation of Western metaphysics. In the latter, the human being is comprised of body and soul but only one of these is superior. This doubleness is superimposed on humanity’s division into males and females. The transcendent is equated with singular truth, and access to it belongs only to one of the sexed terms, the male.<sup>12</sup> Savinio rewrites the tale of Eros and Psyche in order to criticize a twentieth-century Europe still enmeshed in these antediluvian metaphysical problematics. A very early, 1920 essay reviewing Otto Weininger’s book *Sex and Character* is evidence of the kind of attention Savinio had always dedicated to the role of sexual essentialism in metaphysics. In a two-part review for the major newspaper *Il Tempo*, our author claims that Weininger supports the liberation of women.<sup>13</sup> In Savinio’s opinion, the Austrian philosopher sought to free women from the

horror of their traditional reduction to a physical being, a pure generatrix, and from their culturally imposed roles as mothers and matter. Weininger, we read, was no misogynist. On the contrary, he wanted to free women from womanhood as it is defined in entrenched, dualistic gender systems. In defending Weininger, Savinio was able to conceive of his own "feminism"—a term he used for himself<sup>14</sup>—as a salvific mission. And as he moved forward in time, he targeted more than one political movement for its dualistic gender politics. Another object of anathema was Fascism, which propounded myths of virility twinned with a "deified" dictator.

But Savinio's satirical polemics also targeted emancipation myths and certain brands of feminism. Savinio succinctly states his politicizing understanding of gender myths as they intersect with metaphysical ones by observing in an essay on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* that "the soul is a *political* matter."<sup>15</sup> Thus not only oppressive or totalitarian political systems are guilty of "making their own gods." Emancipation myths that attempt to destroy the dualistic gender identities of Western culture may also be governed by *unrecognized* binaries. Savinio believes that the myth of a superior maleness, like the myth of a superior deity, persists in disguised or transvalued forms in modernity. Some forms of feminism, by his lights, want simply to make women over to be manly.

Savinio revisits gender politics qua metaphysics in a number of essays and works of fiction in which dualism and difference are explicitly examined together. He puts his finger on a mythic, highly aestheticized sexual being he finds typical of the modern imaginary. This being is the seemingly "neuter" androgyne who appears to have transcended both genders by combining them into one, but whose supposed perfection rests in fact solidly on a remnant of patriarchal thought. An essay on "Voltaire e Federico II" (Voltaire and Frederick II) in particular centers on a hermaphroditic figure marked by what Savinio calls an "aura of homosexuality" (again, the term is reminiscent of Weininger). This "aura" is sought in an effort nobly to transcend sexual difference in the name of an ideal unity. This transcendence is founded, however, on the negation of woman:

The aura of homosexuality is a necessary to associations of an exquisite and intimately intellectual character, and our times, so hard and brutal, multiply, "out of defensive instincts," this type of association. It is a way, or, better, an attempt to obtain perfection by suppressing the armed rivalry between the two different sexes (between the two "contrary" sexes), which is the prime reason for life's drama. It is the fiction of a hermaphroditic state. It is the dream of a higher civilization.<sup>16</sup>

In this view, periods of historical conflict generate a desire for stability imagined as the absence of difference and in particular the absence of sexuation. Men are led to associate with each other, with the "same," in a homosocial configuration that represents an attempt to rise above the conflict inherent

in associations with women ("the armed rivalry between the two different sexes"). Transcendence requires, however, the suppression of one element of an oppositional pair, and when "absence of difference" is idealized by Western culture, it is woman who is made the inferior, marginal term. When woman is negated, sexuation itself can appear to have been transcended as well, and a universal unity can be attributed to sexlessness or the "neuter." However, that neuter is false. What is true is the dominion of the male who had defined himself against the female. This state is called by Savinio the *fiction* of a "hermaphroditic state." Modern "androgyny" is seen as a particular form of male self-fashioning that does not favor sexual equality.

Savinio's "feminism" leads him to reject this negation of woman: "For me, there can be no perfect society from which woman is absent."<sup>17</sup> Savinio opts for what he calls "mixed society." He immediately proceeds to complicate the issue by outlining the pitfalls for women of an ostensibly unisexual myth: "Of course even 'mixed' society must be wrapped up in a homosexual aura, because in a perfect society, men and women *no longer have different sexes*. This was Nora's ambition, which Ibsen himself did not understand. Such is the equality to which woman aspires. And why not add that man aspires to this equality too?"<sup>18</sup> If through social change, namely feminism, the two sexes become equal and thus the "same," then paradoxically relations between the sexes become "homosexual" again. If desire to eliminate woman either as an impure "other" or as a generatrix of chaos characterizes cultures that strive for a transcendent, perfect unity, that desire is seen by Savinio ironically also to found the dream of women's emancipation. It too aims to abolish sexuation.

Quite logically, given his outlook on the politics of gender myths, Savinio approaches the dyad sacred/monstrous in *La nostra anima* in the context of those human rituals and norms that perpetuate unitarian ideals. For example, the text makes the marriage rite its principal subject, for this ceremony fits nicely with the thematic of sexual dualism: a man and a woman are joined. Savinio's work is in fact rife with weddings and famous couples, from Adam and Eve<sup>19</sup> to Hector and Andromache. Marriage provides him with an important topos ripe for symbolic revisionism. Does marriage between a man and a woman represent two different elements forming a whole that transcends difference? Or are the two sexes always divided even as they lie together? Who in modernity is backing which conception of sexual difference and union? Will we ever relinquish the notion that gender is an anchor of being?

### Aesthetics and Monsters

In essays and journalistic writings such as the one just examined above, but not only there, Savinio presents himself as a thinker who draws together aesthetics, philosophy, and ideologies. He examines Western culture's "ideas" in myriad forms: painting, theater, journalistic writings, novelistic genres, biographies of politicians and artists, and semi-autobiographical writings. A constant



theme is that of the intellectual artist, often embodied in the character Nivasio Dolcemare. The artist usually appears as a man who has quested after the ideal but then rejected it, and in the process has naturally become an accomplished expert on the monstrous as the "other" of the transcendent.

Writing from his position as a veteran of the conceptual and aesthetic warfare that marks European high culture, he tells us of his firm anti-idealist stance: "My choice has been made: I long ago sacrificed *that* kind of greatness and I did so without remorse. Perhaps someday everyone will look back, as I do, at *that* greatness and see only a monstrous, puerile dream."<sup>20</sup> A veteran knows that the "ideal" is the greatest "monster." The artist, through his *paideia*, learns that monsters are tools in the building of norms and that art opposes this activity: "Childhood and the monstrous are inseparable and I cannot conceive of my childhood as anything other than the time of the monsters. Life is a long battle against the monster, in the greatest men a battle illuminated by victory."<sup>21</sup> The "greatest men" can recognize how the powerful, dualist narratives of Western culture set the human being up for a tragic fall from the ideal into monstrosity. Savinio puts the dualist drama in a nutshell in the following passage: "How difficult utterly to free oneself from nature. How difficult to transform oneself entirely, or, better, to form entirely our nature as men, to become wholly 'us,' fully autonomous. Men solely. The most perfect of us trail parts of ourselves in nature. Such is man's drama, his verdict, his damnation. This hybridity, this dualism, this monstrosity. This participation in two diverse natures, one of which is extraneous. This is the principle cause of our unhappiness."<sup>22</sup>

This passage makes it clear that Savinio does not exactly champion hybridity *tout court* as an antidote to idealism. "Unhappiness" would be deflected only if the monster's horror were to be emptied out and the desire for transcendent perfection foregone. What his texts attempt to foreground is the uses and abuses of dualistic thinking, and thus they take as their subject the creation of ideals and the creation of monsters in cultural representations. A major character in *La nostra anima* is in fact a *monster-maker*, kin to Dr. Frankenstein.

### Dualism and Narrative Logic

In *La nostra anima*, the author produces a text that incorporates all the suspicions of a veteran monster-watcher. Narrative technique, especially framing, is central to Savinio's effort. In a prologue or primary framing, the muse of history, Clio, and the phantom of Nivasio's dead father are looking down on Earth from a window she has opened surrealistically in the sky to see Nivasio and the others as they enter the museum where Psyche is housed. Clio views the human creatures with utmost flippancy, diminishing all of their mortal preoccupations and their capabilities. Strife over metaphysical dramas (the "soul exhibit") appears through this framing as the petty business of humans. Distancing is the narrative watchword.<sup>23</sup>

If, initially, the view from on high seems simple, once the reader enters into the second narrative framing of Psyche's tale, the museum visit, she or he is catapulted into an all-too-absorbing, close, boggling multiplicity of perspectives typical of the human, not the godly, experience. The author quickly introduces several characters, and just as quickly multiple viewpoints wed to the various characters emerge. Each of these—Nivasio Dolcemare, his mistress Perdita, and their guide, the physician Sayas—"reads" Psyche's tale differently. And each represents a different human engagement with metaphysical drama itself: Perdita is a believer, Nivasio a skeptic, and Sayas a shameless manipulator of myths. Then there is the tale proper, a tale within a tale within the frame of the prologue. (Interestingly enough, Savinio imagined doing a film of the Eros and Psyche tale in which, to highlight the narrative structure, the tale proper would have been in color and the frame—derived from Apuleius—would have been in black and white.<sup>24</sup>)

While each of the personages is central to Savinio's multiplicity effect, Nivasio Dolcemare is most functional to its narrative structure, for he is tailor-made by his artificer, Savinio, to allow the themes of skepticism, suspicion, and myth-bashing to surface in the work. Nivasio is an incredulous, intelligent, and erudite character who is not only the voice of fruitful doubting but an "actant" inserted into a narrative of uncertainty in concrete ways. He is the one who, during his visit to the "fleshworks," continually wonders if Psyche is even real, animate or inanimate. Nivasio is the one therefore to draw her mythic narration into doubt. He opens up a crucial, mystifying question: if Psyche's deity-rejecting tale has a moral, then who exactly is the "author" of the moral? Is Psyche simply the creature and the voice of Dr. Sayas and hence, symbolically, of "modern thought"?<sup>25</sup>

### Savinio's Satire of Sexual Culture

As Psyche's tale unfolds, Savinio sets out to ridicule the daily life of families bound by irrational rituals dictated by mythic constructs. This kind of satire is straightforward and relatively untroubled by questions of "voice." Through his creation of a family of "ornithanthropes" whom Psyche portrays, Savinio parodies twentieth-century family life and courtship habits.<sup>26</sup> Psyche, her parents, and her sisters are represented as all spectacularly shackled by a conjugal regime. We learn that Psyche's *father* used willpower to suckle his three daughters (all bird-women), and that he equally energetically exercised himself to get husbands for them—first by stalking urinals and then by bribing coworkers. This loving father tirelessly tries to maintain his position as the conservator of patrimony and dynasty; he is so devoted to his sacred duty to marry off his daughters that, when he fails, he proposes to wed them himself.<sup>27</sup>

Psyche's mother, just as dutiful, provides her daughter with all of the knowledge she will need as a new bride, including how to shave and wax her

genitals. Thus the mother fills the modern maternal role of family educator and hygienist. The females in the family are the conservators of many an odd propitiatory rite and "religious" gesture meant to ensure marriage and offspring. In one episode, just before Psyche's marriage night, the women spit in each other's eyes and then pee in unison for good luck. This spoof of the institution of marriage does more than poke fun at human superstitions and silly rituals. It strikes right at the heart of social control, especially during the years of Fascism, when a repressive "matrimonial politics" emerged. Formal government policies included protecting the Italian "race" through decrees against mixed marriages, preventive sterilization, and, in general, "health" practices that penalized the "abnormal."

When Psyche's marriage to Eros is accomplished, female servants in the god's celestial pleasure palace prepare the bride for his visitations with the utmost of care, shaving and disinfecting her private parts in a "squalid gynaeceum" (*squallido gineceo* [p. 58]). The palace is characterized by an absurd "womanism" (*donnismo*): "I was the fifth in a female tonic chord. The bed was female, the floor was female, the ceiling was female, even the air I breathed was female, and I, a woman and nothing but a woman, felt surrounded by a closed, insurmountable femaleness."<sup>28</sup> Gender dualism is further lambasted when Psyche explains that she, the "passive" one, cannot comment on the "operations" her lover performed on her because she would always be drugged into unconsciousness before sex. The satire of sexual norms and mores (females must be terrifically seductive and sexually frigid at once) reaches its heights when, despite anesthesia, Psyche begins to feel so much pleasure that she disobeys the god's orders and shines her lamp on him. She learns that the deity is only a "man," indeed manhood of the basest order.

The revelation is dramatic. The Eros with whom Psyche has coupled does not appear to her as a lovely, desirable "Greek god." Monstrous both by excess and reduction, he is gigantic male genitalia. Psyche will elaborate on this point for her visitors' edification and debunk the nature of the deity once and for all. She tells the visitors that it was true that the god so desired her that he brought her, a mortal, to his godly abode. He forbade her, just as the story goes, ever to look on his countenance. And she loved him beyond all yearning. But everyone has neglected, Psyche charges, to say exactly *why* Eros had forbidden anyone to see him. She explains:

I couldn't believe it. . . . At first I thought it was a hideous mistake. I thought that a filthy beast, under cover of darkness had taken my husband's place—that a slimy slug, a hairless worm had been substituted for the invisible being who had made me so happy, who had given me so much pleasure, so much warmth, so many seeds of life. . . . As soon as I lit the lamp, I saw that the "thing" was already asleep, but still engorged and panting from fatigue. . . . His head was still purple, powerfully domed and flaring at the jaws in

imitation of the helmets of German soldiers, bare of eyes and nose, having nothing but a mouth, a mouth mute and vertical. . . . His tubular body, around which twisted big, blue, palpitating veins, his body bereft of arms as well as legs or wings, rested, awkward and off-balance on two shining and swollen pouches like the pouches of a double bagpipe.<sup>29</sup>

Eros is, in short, an organ and a monster. The marriage of god and soul in this version ends in a divorce, for Psyche can never again face this naked emperor. Modernity's soul and divinity go their separate ways when Psyche throws off the yoke of the male and the deity. But her story does not quite end there.

In the exhibition narrative, the visitor Nivasio timidly advances a final question. Eros may be ugly, he says, but is not the separation of love and soul bad for the world? Psyche denies it, yelling "Balle" (bull); she tells the visitors that only when the soul is liberated from love will "true" love be born. When Nivasio asks what "true" love is, his much appalled companion Perdita begins to scream "for God's sake, shut her off." So Sayas kills the "juice" and Psyche fades, first to a weak glow and then completely.

### The Puppet, Sayas, and Medical Science

Clearly, Savinio means to poke fun at the human penchant for devotion and at the absurdity of human projections. Yet he does much more than write a simple spoof of love or family institutions. He orchestrates an exposé of the uses of both the myth of love and the de-mythologization of love that the new Psyche story offers. Love appears as a component of the conjugal regime of patriarchal cultures. And anti-love appears as a component of a secularizing culture that promotes its "new" truths. Psyche's feminist revision of the marriage myth must be understood then to be deployed by her *creator*, Sayas, to distance modern thinking from religious thinking and to separate modern thinking on sexuality and gender from ancient paradigms. In this sense, *Savinio's* work tells not a tale of liberation but of a woman's disempowerment. Psyche may narrate her victorious emancipation, but this dramatic, electrical phantasm exists in Savinio's fiction as the creature of the museum director/doctor.

If Sayas controls Psyche's discourse, then how can her interlocutors, and Savinio's readers, swallow her emancipation narrative as "true"?<sup>30</sup> Psyche speaks the discourse of autonomy and emancipation, yet paradoxically she is a puppet in a show. She is hardly autonomous from Sayas. In fact, the staged nature of her discourse is foregrounded by the author at several turns. The narrator observes that the museum entrance resembles a "funhouse."<sup>31</sup> The ticket-paying visitors go to see what is called a "tableau" (quadro), and when Psyche speaks, it is "as if a curtain had been raised."<sup>32</sup> Just as Psyche inhabited a pleasure palace in which, she says, everything took place automatically, in the doctor's museum she is equally the prisoner of another. With Eros, she was servile femininity; for Sayas she is instead a feminist puppet.

It is highly significant that feminist ideas in Savinio's text appear to be of a piece with the discourse of modern materialism, with "positivist" science embodied in the figure of the doctor. We must remember on this score that Savinio targets both the myth of human autonomy from the deity and the "feminist" myth as caught up in outmoded dualistic conceptions of the human being. We must also keep in mind the author's characterization of humanity's destructive and persistent desire to banish hybridity and monstrosity and "to become wholly 'us,' fully autonomous." In Savinio's view, the modern doctor/scientist labors to preserve a crucial pretense of autonomy for modern culture, and the author sets out to uncover the machination. In *La nostra anima*, Savinio casts the proponents of purely "human" knowledge—of science, in short—not as misguided believers in human potential or human "divinity" but rather as perverse figures who profess objectivity while deceptively pushing their line of "thought products." The following exchange between Perdita and Sayas makes this point: "'Then it's true!' she exclaimed to the doctor. 'We have a soul and our soul is immortal. They often said as much, but I didn't believe it.' The doctor arched his eyebrows and gasped. 'What are you saying, my dear? I am a scientist. For us scientists the soul is a mixture of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide.'"<sup>33</sup>

Sayas makes modest claims for the power of his brand of thought. Yet the entire museum setting that is his domain counters the assertion. Savinio orchestrates a discrepancy fraught with meaning. With his museum exhibit, Sayas has all-too-knowingly faked a "soul" who is an atavistic creature and fantastical being of yesteryear. A museum display, Psyche is also a monument, with all the distancing historicity a monument entails. She is, in a nice touch, covered with graffiti left by masses of visitors (one inscription reads "fesso chi legge" [a dupe is reading this]). From Sayas's perspective, the creature is meant to function as the privileged sign that monsters *no longer* populate the world as portents of the supernatural. They can only appear projected into the modernity that preserves them as the exclusive province of a medico-scientific establishment. The monster is the doctor's cultural tool and much more than a mixture of elements.

Before treating the figure of Sayas in greater detail, it will be useful to speculate on Savinio's focus on science, and medical science in particular. From his perspective, science is not "empiricism" but the offspring of Platonic idealism and the proponent of "knowledge for its own sake." Science is "professional" thought and "a system of knowledge separated from the world."<sup>34</sup> Within his broad anti-idealism, why might Savinio choose a doctor, a medical scientist, to represent modern thought and the social configurations associated with it? The choice may be explained by a fact of the history of science: it was the medical discipline within the biological sciences that first purported to be able to "explain" mythic monsters. The historian of science Georges Canguilhem has masterfully described the rise of a medicalized teratology which suggested that monster legends were based on the true presence of specific, classifiable,

malformed human bodies (the result of mutations or genetic defects).<sup>35</sup> In the teratological viewpoint, “sirens,” for example, are explained by the abnormality “fused legs.” Scientific experimentation was even capable of provoking monstrous abnormalities such as the three-legged chick by poking embryos with needles at critical stages of development. Thus, as Rosi Braidotti has observed, “monstrous and abnormal creatures, that once were objects of marvel, become the prey of a massive medicalization on the part of scientific discourse.”<sup>36</sup>

For Savinio, the category of monstrosity in modernity is the jurisdiction of the clinician. To use the vocabulary of Canguilhem, the monster has turned into a monstrosity. Savinio concludes that monsters have not disappeared from circulation at all, even though they are disallowed in modern thinking. Psyche may not exactly “exist,” but she is on display in the hospital/museum where the new deity, Sayas, deploys her to propagate misleading myths about human nature. Psyche speaks the newest myth, that of presumed human autonomy functional to absolute “objectivity.”

In Savinio’s tale not only the Psyche character but also Nivasio Dolcemare is pertinent to the author’s discourse on the jurisdiction of science over monsters. Nivasio utters a series of observations about Psyche that further contribute to the author’s critique of scientific objectivity. Nivasio is, we learn, tormented by not knowing if the ornithanthrope is animate or inanimate, real or unreal. Nivasio is especially troubled by the way she imitates imperfection perfectly: “Nivasio Dolcemare was tormented by the suspicion that this representation of our soul was really just an animated figure. The perfection with which the young girl imitated nature even in its imperfections, brought to perfection her own mystery.”<sup>37</sup> Savinio here emphasizes the point that the contrived Psyche is made convincing as a representation through the presence of impurity and imperfection. Imperfection makes her “real” to her visitors. A monstrous human/animal hybridity is, it seems, already naturalized and “true” in a post-Darwinian age. In the biopolitical discourse in modernity, the imperfect is exhibited as the new “real,” the new “soul,” and a new humanity. Thus the monster is actually much more than a freakish creation of yesteryear that makes modern thinking look sophisticated. Doctor Sayas and modern science embrace monstrosity as a new level of “visibility” of the human, a new level of truth.

Logically, Savinio targets the doctor character’s objectivity, truthfulness, and power all at once in his invective, for Sayas is the wizard who runs the autonomous-soul illusion in *La nostra anima*. No character receives a more satirical treatment. For example, although he is supposed to be supremely masterful, Sayas appears as much a cruel zookeeper as an accomplished scientist who has rendered the soul electrically immortal. Psyche is the pitiful charge at his command in the squalid basement cell that is the doctor’s domain:

On the sordid floor squatted a young girl, her legs folded under her  
and her heels together under the pink, round forms of her arse. . . .  
Two bowls were set on the ground: one was filled with putrid, green

water, and the other was filled with grains of corn. The excremental olives were more numerous near the naked young girl; beneath her arse a dense, yellowish liquid spread out in a pool. The stench was so strong that Sayas took a large glass pistol from his back pocket and, pulling the trigger, shot an iridescent jet at the wall and floor.<sup>38</sup>

Toting this odd weapon, the master even uses the language of an “animal trainer” as he prods Psyche to begin her story: “Go on, my lovely! Tell these kind people why Eros didn’t want you to see him.”<sup>39</sup>

Tellingly, the beast will perform a trick precisely related to truth-building; Sayas utters the following preamble to Psyche’s tale: “‘You’ll see,’ the doctor added, turning to Perdita and Nivasio Dolcemare. ‘The answer shifts the problem of love onto an entirely new plane: its ‘true plane.’”<sup>40</sup> As we know, Psyche will debunk the myth of love, much to the visitors’ dismay. And here the motif of the trained beast takes on multiple connotations. Significantly, the doctor trains *someone else* to reveal the unpleasant truth that love and the gods are not what they were supposed to be. Savinio has a “prudent” Sayas achieving his undermining of Eros-as-deity through the figment of Psyche.<sup>41</sup> He thereby strengthens his characterization of Sayas, making him cautious and evasive at once.

### Jewishness and the Trait of Manipulation

The trait of deception is crucial to Savinio’s discourse here, along with the trait of seduction. Neither of these qualities can be separated from Savinio’s way of representing Jewish “difference,” yet the web of associations has never been approached by critics. As the piece unfolds, it becomes clear that while Savinio explores sexism in all of its complexity (if from a wholly male standpoint), he does not engage in a comparable critique of racist characterizations of the human being. In fact, anti-Semitic characterizations find an all-too-comfortable place in Savinio’s writing.

The structure of Savinio’s characterization of Sayas is complex. First of all, we learn that he is Salonika’s best doctor. Next we are told immediately that Nivasio Dolcemare dislikes Sayas because the physician may have seduced Perdita, his patient, while he was allegedly curing her of hemorrhoids: “Nivasio Dolcemare was not on friendly terms with Dr. Sayas; he even suspected him of being Perdita’s lover or at least of having been. Which is not to say that he was jealous of the doctor. How can anyone be jealous of a doctor? Sexual relations between a doctor and his patient are part of the treatment.”<sup>42</sup> Nivasio came to distrust Sayas because he made Perdita his dupe: “And he continued exploring with his expert finger the orifice immune to hemorrhoids. Can anyone conceive of such ignorance of anatomy in a man considered the best doctor in Salonika? Perdita punched her fist against the doctor’s polished skull, disengaged her ankles from the chrome metal stirrups, jumped down from the little bed, ran behind the screen, and quickly slipped into her panties.”<sup>43</sup> Savinio obviously

jokes here about the degree to which doctors are authorized to scrutinize the body. He also represents the Jewish doctor as horrifically manipulative.

The invective against doctors, and Jews, mounts when Savinio gives us a doctor who entices the bird-woman with a shiny object, his shoe: "This shoe was so brilliant that it would have dazzled anyone and not just this young girl reduced to so pitiful a state and more susceptible than anyone else to the attractions of shiny objects. . . . The overpolished shoe . . . is a sign of egotism, cruelty, and the will to dominate weaker beings, especially women."<sup>44</sup> A highly significant paradox is created here: an exploiter of "weak" women is the same one who offers up triumphant tales of female liberation to the museum visitors.

To the trait of horrifying deception Savinio adds a monstrous physical appearance. Sayas appears as a randy "rooster." The doctor's penchant for probing is at the same time transformed into professional exploratory sniffing with an ugly, animalesque nose: "Sayas, throwing his head back like a rooster, inhaled powerfully. Sayas had elongated, voluptuous nostrils filled with tufts of very black, moist hair. As he observed those vibrant, expert nostrils, Nivasio Dolcemare was thinking that not only Sayas's fingers but also his nostrils were tools of the trade."<sup>45</sup> This efficient nose makes Sayas's own male bird-body doubly monstrous in its excess and its displacements. He is bald, but "manly" hair grows in the wrong place. The highly developed sense of smell reinforces the idea of animality. With the aid of an anti-Semitic stereotype, a discourse on a Jewish nose,<sup>46</sup> and with play on the human/animal binary, Savinio has modeled a specific monstrosity for his institutional figure. The monstrous, invasive, Jewish body joins with the trait of deception to conjure up a tainted and inhuman manipulator of knowledge and a repellent master of falsehood.

Tellingly, this monster inhabits a monstrous space, and the modern, instrumental quality of the doctor's office is explicitly noted when Savinio describes "an office with all the modern equipment."<sup>47</sup> Sayas is thus linked to modern ideologies, specifically to modern institutions of social control.<sup>48</sup> We read in fact that he belongs to "established groups such as priests, soldiers, and doctors."<sup>49</sup>

Why would Savinio need the racist traits he attributes to his Jewish doctor in order to make his points about ontotheocracy, modernity, and science? I believe there are several factors at work. First, in his early writings, Savinio had admired Weininger's *Sex and Character*, which has a chapter on "Judaism." In it, Weininger asserts that "the Judaic element in modern materialistic science needs to be better understood," and then he proceeds to claim that "Judaism in science . . . is the endeavor to remove transcendentalism."<sup>50</sup> The connection to Sayas seems obvious. We can read in fact in Savinio's 1920 review of *Sex and Character* how Savinio precisely links what he calls "Semitism" to positivism and artistic decadence by characterizing modern times as "the days of sterile, arid, desolate positivist doctrines, of pragmatism, of the search for truth put into the hands of science (subsidized science, rewarded, encouraged, supported science: the triumph of Semitism), of art turned away from its moral and symbolic



mission and degraded into a dry, mute, naturalistic representation.”<sup>51</sup> In the text written nearly twenty-five years later, Sayas seems to embody this Weiningerian, supposed “Jewish character.” Savinio’s opinion of Jews is even more negative than his highly ambivalent attitude toward woman-as-“other,” for Jews do not here evince any subversive potential linked to difference. In the case of Sayas, there is only deformity, although in other texts Savinio evokes Jewishness in the context of a “fecund” hybridity. This occurs notably in the work *Hermaphrodito*, where Jewish multiplicity is linked to the Diaspora and set against some other cultures’ desire for transcendental, religious “oneness.”

Moreover, Savinio recognizes that modernity has pretended to dispel the monstrous while it remains an effective tool in myth-building. Modernity entails a *disguised* ontotheocracy in which doctors and scientists are the new deities. The notion of deception as a purported Jewish trait is part of a history of anti-Semitic discourse.<sup>52</sup> Savinio needs to engage the trait of deception in his own anti-empiricist fable, and he chooses Jewishness to convey it. Just as he tries to steer clear of entrenched sexist dualisms and expose them, he mires himself in racist ones.

### Competing Monstrosities

In Savinio’s telling, Sayas uses the Psyche myth to further a crucial modern myth: the power of unmasking.<sup>53</sup> Psyche holds up her lamp to reveal a truth. The story Sayas has Psyche tell of unmasking the male deity, fleeing from it once and for all and freeing herself, appears to Savinio as itself a prime mythmaking enterprise of modernity. In his view, this modern, secular, “scientific” myth of separation from a male deity manipulates the idea of woman just as myths of metaphysical unity or marriage did. Furthermore, it manipulates “feminism” as a political movement and itself constitutes a political position.

Is feminism therefore, in Savinio’s judgment, a political mistake? Is separatism misguided? How does his treatment of feminism in conjunction with modern monstrosity itself produce social ideologies? In Savinio’s view emancipation movements fruitfully center cultural attention on gender roles and their dualistic underpinnings, but they are also marked by a troubling contradiction: feminism may be born of an outmoded dualism but valid at the same time. Those who are cast as the inferior half of any dualistic dyad would be right to rebel because historically they have been made powerless. Savinio in fact grants in the economy of his tale a certain nobility and the lion’s share of hermeneutic richness to the imprisoned Psyche over the other monstrous beings (Sayas and Eros).

Conversely, those who wield power are the least noble and the most despicable. Savinio explains, in his article on *A Doll’s House*, why men deny woman a soul: “For political reasons. Because the soul is a *political* matter. I would even go farther and say that the soul is the political part of an individual.”<sup>54</sup> He then draws an analogy between denying a soul to woman to the imperialist

denial of nationhood to colonial countries: "The first cannon shot in a war of 'independence' is for all peoples the sound of the door slamming that night when Nora Helmer freed herself forever from the sweet tyranny of the doll's house."<sup>55</sup> Savinio insists that defining the human being's soul, and subjectivity itself, is never a neutral enterprise in Western myths.

And Savinio's views, true to form, are not neutral either. His view of the changing relations of men and women in modernity constitutes only one way of conceiving the traumatic change from a sacred notion of love to a secular one.<sup>56</sup> Over the first half of the twentieth century, sociocultural identities were being dramatically recast in the wake of both modernization and secularization, and Savinio focuses his attention closely on one area: ideologies of gender difference as they intersect with ideologies of autonomy. It may seem, if we look at historical social practice, that a rather tame threat of female independence motivated him to work very hard to dispel the specter of separatism. After all, had women achieved any great emancipation in Italy in 1944? They hadn't even gained the right to vote, and in the years of Fascism they suffered under extremely restrictive gender roles. Savinio's perspective on "feminism" gravitates nonetheless to the question of changing bonds with men as the result of emancipation. That, of course, is not all there is to feminism. It might in fact be more concerned with bonds between women than between men and women, to give just one example.

The issue of separatism is clearly the object of Savinio's intellectual ardor, and much is at stake for him in representing feminism in this limited, somewhat anachronistic way. Ibsen's Nora is Savinio's prime feminist, yet *A Doll's House* appeared a good fifty years before *La nostra anima*. He could have selected others, especially from more recent texts written by women. The autonomy issue appears to Savinio to possess the potential to "undo" Western thought on the gendered nature of the human being. This is its draw. The concrete literary result is that Psyche in *La nostra anima* is made to carry nearly the whole weight of the author's discourse. She becomes the depository of a discursive embarrassment of riches. Given this situation, it is natural that Savinio also hangs all narrative suspense in the tale upon Psyche. She is, tellingly, the subject of the only important narrative reversal in the work. Just as soon as Psyche finishes her tale of liberation, Sayas "kills" her, cutting off her current. She may have triumphantly escaped the clutches of Eros, but as she threatens to escape the control of her creator and tell her visitors what "true love" is, she is quashed and fades.

The complexity Savinio grants his Psyche separates her decidedly from the other monstrous figures in very concrete ways. On the one hand, she represents "false discourse" because she is programmed by Sayas. She also becomes "repressed discourse" because she is denied a voice by Sayas. This ambivalence embedded in the story is extremely telling. And it illustrates the author's attitude to hybridity itself. He rejoices in its subversive side, since mixed things are by definition liberated from rigid classifications. Repressed difference

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can bring a voice of transgression. Yet at the same time Savinio recoils from any hybrid being's necessary inclusion of the "different," of the other-than-the-self. This otherness is both desirable and intolerable. The repugnant qualities Savinio grants Psyche are evidence of this hardly feminist revulsion toward women. Savinio chooses to represent Psyche as at once an audacious woman who has defied the deity and yet as a horrific, passive, infantile throwback sitting abjectly in her excrement.

Savinio's own position as the creator of Psyche is scarcely neutral. Is he less the manipulator than his own despicable character Sayas? He pointedly edits the familiar Psyche myth, for instance, so that a good half of it is completely left aside—not rewritten. This is the portion that has lately fascinated feminist scholars.<sup>57</sup> After Psyche is cast off by Eros, she regains her status as his beloved by completing a series of impossible tasks set for her by Aphrodite. None of the "heroic" Psyche pursues entail combat; instead they revolve around quests and the gathering of knowledge and skills using loving and loyal "animal helpers." She ultimately gains, by wit and fortitude, the status of an immortal who will dwell on Olympus with her spouse Eros. This competent, evolving, and "heroic" woman is written out of Savinio's tale. It is as though he could not imagine a woman's way of searching for knowledge and could not conceive of feminism as anything other than a frightening trap. He presents women's autonomy squarely from the male point of view.

Psyche's contradictory role in this tale, as both false discourse and repressed discourse, points to significant contradictions in Savinio's own thinking on difference in general. If monsters work to represent the relations between humans and a "deity," they are also positioned along a continuum that moves from divinity to negativity. And while Savinio writes a meta-monstrous tale that exposes the workings of myth-building, a continuum of values remains surreptitiously at work in his own monster-making. If Savinio meant to teach us that there is no pure monster-making, only always valuation, his text does more than its author ever expected it to do: the monsters in it reveal the *author's* valuations. Eros, Psyche, and Sayas certainly were not created equal. Even allowing for Savinio's ambivalence toward female difference, Psyche as a monstrous being evinces an ambiguity and nobility that neither Eros nor Sayas has. Even given the fact that she is constructed as a character by Savinio out of some trite and repugnant notions of womanhood, she is a being rich with meanings. She is invested with "fecund" contradictions.<sup>58</sup>

This is not the case with Savinio's representation of the physically revolting, monstrous Dr. Sayas. While Savinio has labored to teach his readers that ideologies of sexual difference are produced in representations of the monstrous, Savinio does not engage racist ideologies of difference with the kind of intense reflection he dedicates to sexual difference. The concept of race itself might have been the subject of his attack on outmoded dualist paradigms. Yet the opposite occurs: Savinio deploys precisely an anti-Semitic, racist trait—the notion of purported Jewish deceptiveness—to articulate a dualistic difference between an

"honest" and multiplicitous way of thinking and a manipulative scientific myth of the human essence.

Savinio's retelling of the marriage of Eros and Psyche has, for better, given us a precocious recognition of the political nature of monsters. And, for worse, he teaches us in all-too-many ways that monsters are beings that govern the *production* of difference.

### Notes

1. See Sir James George Frazer, *Psyche's Task: A Discourse Concerning the Influence of Superstition on the Growth of Institutions* (London: Macmillan, 1909). Otto Weininger, *Eros und Psyche: Studien un Briefe 1899–1902* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990).
2. Salonika was a crucial Allied operation on the Macedonian front, where Savinio carried out the soldierly duty of translator.
3. The importance of the wax museum, with its emphasis on "effects," to modern discourse on the monstrous has been studied by Marie-Hélène Huet in *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), in her chapter on "Family Undertaking: Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum," pp. 188–218.
4. English translations are taken from "Psyche's Tale," in *Alberto Savinio: Lives of the Gods*, trans. James Brooks and Susan Etlinger (London: Atlas Press, 1991); here page 7. I use this translation throughout, making a few small changes where necessary. The Italian is drawn from *La nostra anima* (Milan: Adelphi, 1981); here "museo dei manichini di carne," p. 11.
5. I draw Savinio's views here from an essay on "Tommaso Campanella," in Alberto Savinio, *Opere: Scritti dispersi tra guerra e dopoguerra (1943–52)* (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), pp. 25–33. Translations of works other than *La nostra anima* are mine throughout.
6. See the short essay "Nostra anima" in *Opere*, p. 250.
7. See Rosi Braidotti, *Madri, mostri e macchine* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1996), p. 67, for an analysis of the structural opposition male/female, self/other that founds the representation of monsters in the philosophical and scientific traditions.
8. See his *Sorte dell'Europa* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977), pp. 70–71.
9. Alberto Savinio, *Narrate uomini la vostra storia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1984).
10. See for example the essay on "Lo stato" in *Sorte dell'Europa*, especially p. 100, and the essays "Europa" and "Germanesimo," in Alberto Savinio, *Nuova enciclopedia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977).
11. *Opere*, p. 557: "Chiamo presocratico colui che non pensa in maniera dualista (fisico e metafisico, materia e spirito, corpo e anima, umano e divino, terrestre e celeste)."
12. I draw from Rosi Braidotti the idea that monsters "organize scientifically and socially the perception of incarnate differences." Braidotti places an emphasis on the female body's "deformity" in gestation. See *Madri, mostri e macchine*, p. 56. Like other scholars, Braidotti holds that the monstrous body articulates a relation between the earthly and the supernatural, p. 57.

13. Savinio's views of Weininger cannot be summed up in a sentence. See his commentary on women's "morality" in "Weininger," in *Mistero dello sguardo*, ed. Rosita Tordi (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1992), pp. 91–104.
14. See his essay on "Nora" in *Nuova enciclopedia*, p. 273.
15. "L'aura di omosessualità è condizione necessaria alle associazioni di carattere squisitamente e intimamente intellettuale, e il nostro tempo, così duro e brutale, sta moltiplicando, 'per istinto di difesa,' questo tipo di associazioni. È un modo questo, e dirò meglio un tentativo di raggiungere la perfezione, sopprimendo quella rivalità armata fra i suoi sessi diversi (fra i due sessi 'contrari') che è la ragione prima del dramma della vita. È la finzione di uno stato ermafrodito. È il sogno di una più alta civiltà." *Opere*, p. 189.
16. See Alberto Savinio, *Vita di Enrico Ibsen* (Milan: Adelphi, 1979), p. 44.
17. "Per me, non c'è società perfetta cui manchi la donna." *Opere*, p. 189.
18. "S'intende che anche la società 'mista' dev'essere avvolta dentro un'aura omosessuale, perché in una società perfetta, uomini e donne non *hanno più sesso diverso*. Questa l'ambizione di Nora, che nemmeno Ibsen capì. Questa la parità cui aspira la donna. E perché non aggiungere che a questa parità aspira anche l'uomo?" *Opere*, p. 189; Savinio's italics.
19. Savinio discusses these questions in an analysis of the "ancient little fable" of Adam and Eve in *Vita di Enrico Ibsen*, pp. 40–44.
20. "Per quello che è di noi, la nostra scelta è fatta: a quella grandezza abbiamo rinunciato da tempo e senza rimpianto. Come noi ora, un giorno forse tutti guarderanno a quella grandezza come a un sogno puerile e mostruoso." *Opere*, p. 28.
21. "Infanzia e mostruosità vanno di conserva e io non penso altrimenti alla mia infanzia, se non come al tempo dei mostri. La vita è una lunga lotta contro il mostro, negli uomini maggiori una lotta illuminata dalla vittoria." *Opere*, p. 28.
22. "Difficile liberarsi completamente dalla natura. Difficile trasformarsi interamente, o meglio formare interamente la nostra natura di uomini, diventare integralmente 'noi,' del tutto autonomi. Soltanto uomini. I più perfetti di noi trascinano ancora lembi di sé nella natura. Questo il dramma dell'uomo, la sua condanna, la sua dannazione. Questo ibridismo, questo dualismo, questa mostruosità. Questo partecipare di due nature diverse, una delle quali estranea. È questa la ragione principale della nostra infelicità." *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 94.
23. Carlino views this sort of device as intended to deprive literature of its consumability, as he writes in *Alberto Savinio: la scrittura in stato d'assedio* (Rome: Istituto della enciclopedia italiana, 1979), p. 185. Silvana Cirillo has noted the pedagogical value of the way in which Savinio orchestrates clashing views, in *Alberto Savinio: Le molte facce di un artista di genio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), p. 329.
24. See Vanni Bramanti's *Gli dei e gli eroi di Savinio* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1983), pp. 37–38.
25. Carlino notes that Savinio's work itself has the character of a "museum of horror" (museo degli orrori), in *Alberto Savinio*, p. 165.
26. This term appears early on, in *Hermaphrodito*, p. 49.
27. The theme of marriage is taken up at length in *Vita di Enrico Ibsen*, where Savinio elaborates his idea of matrimony as a fortress, virtually a little state; see pp. 69–70.
28. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 35. "Ero la quinta di un accordo tonale di femminità. Femmineo il letto, femmineo il pavimento, femmineo il soffitto, femminea l'aria stessa che

- respiravo e io, donna nient'altro che donna, mi sentivo circondata da un chiuso, insormontabile donnismo" (p. 58).
29. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 38. "Non potevo credere. . . . Mi parve a tutta prima un mostruoso errore. Che una bestia immonda si fosse sostituita nel buio a mio marito. Che un viscido lumacone, un bruco calvo avesse preso il posto di colui che, invisibile, mi dava tanta felicità, tanto piacere, tanto calore, tanto germe di vita. . . . Subito che ebbi fatta luce, quello già dormiva, ma turgido ancora e ansante della fatica portata poco stante a termine. Paonazza tuttavia la testa, potentemente cupolata e svasata alle ganasce a imitazione dell'elmetto di guerra dei soldati tedeschi, priva così di occhi come di naso e solo di bocca fornita, muta e verticale. . . . Il suo corpo tubolare, sul quale s'incordavano e palpitavano grosse vene turchine, e priva sia di braccia, sia di gambe, sia di ali posava goffo e squilibrato sopra due borse rigonfie e lustre, simili alle borse di una doppia ciaramella" (pp. 62–64).
  30. Bramanti has noted that the tale from start to finish plays on the idea of fakery or "finzione." *Gli dei e gli eroi di Savinio*, pp. 42–43.
  31. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 13; "ingresso di quegli stabilimenti d'illusioni" (p. 22).
  32. *Psyche's Tale*, pp. 14 and 23; "come se si fosse sollevata una tenda" (p. 38).
  33. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 20. "'Dunque è vero!' esclamò Perdita rivolgendosi al dottore. 'Noi abbiamo un'anima e la nostra anima è immortale. Me lo avevano detto ma io non ci credevo.' Il dottore inarcò la sopracciglia e aspirò una abbondante colonna d'aria. 'Che posso dirle, signora? Io sono uno scienziato. Per noi scienziati l'anima è un composto di ossigeno, azoto e anidride carbonica'" (p. 33).
  34. Savinio briefly outlines his view in a review of a book by philologist Giorgio Colli; *Opere*, p. 807.
  35. Georges Canguilhem, "La monstrosité et le monstrueux," *Diogenè* 40 (1963): 29–43.
  36. Rosi Braidotti, *Madri, mostri e macchine*, p. 38.
  37. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 24. "Il sospetto tormenta Nivasio Dolcemare che questa rappresentazione della nostra anima non sia veramente se non una figura disanimata. Quale la verità? La perfezione con che costei imita fino le imperfezioni della natura, perfeziona lo stesso mistero di se stessa" (p. 40).
  38. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 15. "Una fanciulla era accosciata sul pavimento sordido, le gambe ripiegate e i calcagni riuniti sotto le rosate rotondità del sedere. . . . Sul pavimento posavano due ciotole: una piena di acqua inverdita dalla corruzione, l'altra gialla di chicchi di granturco. Intorno alla ignuda fanciulla le ulive escrementali erano più fitte, da sotto il sedere dilagava a falda sul pavimento un liquido denso e giallastro. Il fetore era così forte che Sayas cavò dalla tasca posteriore dei calzoni una grossa pistola di vetro, e premendo il grilletto lanciò a più riprese sul muro e sul pavimento un getto iridato" (pp. 25–26).
  39. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 22. "Su, bella! Di' a questi signori perché Amore non voleva farsi vedere da te" (p. 36).
  40. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 22. "'Udrete' aggiunge il dottore rivolto a Perdita e a Nivasio Dolcemare. 'È una ragione che sposta totalmente il problema dell'amore e lo pone su un piano nuovo; dirò meglio: sul suo "vero" piano'" (p. 36).
  41. When Perdita asks a question, Sayas won't answer; he has Psyche answer for him: "The prudent Sayas did not answer; he indicated that Perdita should listen to Psyche"; *Psyche's Tale*, p. 24. "Il prudente Sayas non rispose ma fece cenno a Perdita di ascoltare Psiche" (p. 39).

42. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 10. "Nivasio Dolcemare aveva poca dimistichezza con Sayas. Lo sospettava anche di essere l'amante di Perdita o almeno di esserlo stato. Non si vuol dire con questo che Nivasio Dolcemare fosse geloso di Sayas. Come si può essere gelosi di un medico? I rapporti sessuali tra il medico e la cliente fanno parte in certo modo della cura" (pp. 16–17).
43. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 19. "E intanto continuava a esplorare con dito sapiente la sede immune di emorroidi. È concepibile tanta ignoranza dell'anatomia in uomo che passava per il primo medico di Salonico? Perdita puntò le pugna sul cranio lucido di calvizie del dottore, sfilò le caviglie dalle staffe di metallo cromato, scese dal lettuccio, corse dietro il paravento, si rinfilò in fretta le mutandine" (p. 19).
44. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 23. "Questa era così lucida, che non solo quella fanciulla ridotta in condizioni miserrime e suscettibile più di nessuno di lasciarsi attrarre dagli oggetti che brillano, ma chiunque ne sarebbe rimasto abbagliato. . . . Diffidate della scarpa troppo lustra. Essa dinota egoismo, crudeltà, volontà di ridurre a propria vittima la creatura più debole e soprattutto la donna" (p. 38).
45. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 13. "Sayas tirò indietro la testa con un movimento di gallinaccio e aspirò una potente colonna d'aria. Sayas aveva lunghe narici voluttuose, onde ciuffi di peli sporgevano nerissimi e irrorati. Alla vista di quelle narici vibratili e addestrate, Nivasio Dolcemare pensò che nonché le dita, anche le narici di Sayas erano degli strumenti professionali" (p. 22).
46. See here Sander Gilman, "The Jewish Nose," in *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 169–93. Gilman discusses the crude nineteenth-century (and later) caricatures of Jews and notes how "These extraordinary caricatures stressed one central aspect of the physiognomy of the Jewish male, his nose, which represented that hidden sign of sexual difference, his circumcised penis"; p. 189.
47. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 11. Brook and Etlinger translate this phrase simply as "his office"—"Gabinetto modernamente attrezzato" (p. 18).
48. Carlino suggests that the doctor figure represents "positivist certainty"; *Alberto Savinio*, p. 182.
49. *Psyche's Tale*, p. 10. "Gli appartenenti a determinati corpi come preti, militari, medici" (p. 17).
50. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (London: William Heinemann and G. P. Putnam's and Sons, 1906), p. 314.
51. Savinio, "Weininger," in *Mistero dello sguardo*, p. 102: "l'epoca sterile, arida, desolata, delle dottrine positiviste, del pragmatismo, della ricerca della verità affidata alla scienza (la scienza sovvenzionata, premiata, incoraggiata, beneficata: trionfo del semitismo), dell'arte decaduta dei suoi scopi simbolici e morali a secca e muta rappresentazione naturalistica."
52. See Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1986, especially p. x, for a history of anti-Semitic notions about Jewish "secrets" and deception. Gilman writes: "It is evident that the myth-building that surrounds the concept of a 'hidden' language of the Jews links both language and discourse in the stereotype of the Jew." Cited in Nancy Harrowitz, *Antisemitism, Misogyny and the Logic of Cultural Difference: Cesare Lombroso and Matilde Serao* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 47.
53. See *Opere*, p. 284: "The formation of mythology does not stop at the moment in which monsters disappear from the earth and demi-gods abandon it. It goes on

because under various names and deprived of its immediate poetic aura, mythology continues to form itself over us like an iridescent vapor and it continues to carry on all the while its day by day existence—and to die.”

54. “Per politica. Perché l’anima è un fatto *politico*. Dirò meglio: l’anima è la parte politica dell’individuo.” *Nuova enciclopedia*, p. 273.
55. “la prima cannonata di una guerra d’indipendenza è per i popoli il tonfo della porta di casa, quella notte che Nora Helmer si libera per sempre della dolce tirannia di casa di bambola.” *Nuova enciclopedia*, p. 274.
56. On this topic see Alain Touraine, *Critica della modernità* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1993), pp. 332–33; originally published in 1992 as *Critique de la modernité*.
57. See, for example, Lee R. Edwards, *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).
58. Braidotti notes that if monsters often embody an element of divinity, nonetheless some monsters do not receive much at all compared to others; *madri, mostri e macchine*, p. 72.



## CHAPTER 2

### *“Mon maître, mon monstre”: Primo Levi and Monstrous Science*

NANCY HARROWITZ



In 1966 Primo Levi published his first collection of science fiction stories, entitled *Storie naturali* (Natural Stories), to be followed by another collection, *Vizio di forma* (Vice of Form), in 1971.<sup>1</sup> Levi's science fiction holds a surprisingly liminal place in his opus. Almost entirely ignored by critics and not generally known by the reading public, the science fiction nonetheless provides a rich site for some of the most compelling and serious issues to be found anywhere in Levi's work. One of these issues, which I shall focus on in this essay, is the relation between modern science and the Holocaust. Levi elaborates their connection by adopting a discourse of monstrosity as a method of exploring and reading scientific epistemology and its relation to scientific ethics and politics.

Before concentrating on a specific example of Levi's use of monstrosity, it is important to note how he has set up the entire text of *Storie naturali* in terms of the monstrous through his choice of an epigraph. The tremendous complexity of his science fiction is forecast and framed by this epigraph, which is in itself a study in complications. From Rabelais's Renaissance masterpiece *Gargantua*, the section that Levi abridges and cites is from the well-known fourth chapter, and he chooses the passage that comes directly after the description of Gargantua's strange birth from his mother's left ear:

If you don't believe it, I should worry! but a good man, a man of good sense, believes what he's told and what he finds in books. Didn't Solomon say, in Proverbs XIV: "Innocents believe every word, etc."? . . . For my part, I find nothing written in the Holy Bible that is against it. But if such had been the will of God, would

you say that He couldn't have done it? Hey, for mercy's sake, don't ever muddlefuddle your minds with these vain thoughts, for I tell you that to God nothing is impossible, and, if He wanted, from now on women would have their children that way through the ear. Was not Bacchus engendered through Jupiter's thigh? . . . Wasn't Minerva born out of Jupiter's brain, by way of his ear? . . . Castor and Pollux out of the shell of an egg laid and hatched by Leda? But you would be much more amazed and astonished if I now expounded to you the whole chapter in Pliny in which he talks about strange and unnatural births; however, I am not as barefaced a liar as he was. Read Book 7 of his *Natural History*, chapter 3, and stop pounding on my understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Once this epigraph has been scanned by the reader, Levi's own title, *Storie naturali*, is perhaps no longer a mystery. But even though Levi reveals the source for his title, namely Pliny, the question of the epigraph is far from solved. One wonders, for example, why Levi doesn't just cite Pliny for his epigraph, since the title of his collection suggests that this may be a rewriting or a modeling after of Pliny. Why the double frame, Rabelais citing Pliny, rather than a straight horse's mouth? The differences between Pliny and Rabelais are vast: the one a historical narrative which tries to convince through anecdotes, eyewitness reports, and claims to veracity and the other an ironic, enormous superfiction that depends on hyperbole and exaggeration as its *modus operandi*. Seeking to undermine those truth claims on Pliny's part, Rabelais's effect is an ironic distancing from the subject of monstrous birth. He achieves this through the veiled hostility of jokes and obscenities, and through the epistemology and genealogy of lying that he presents, using Pliny as both his source and his scapegoat. Rabelais, however, is anything but straightforward himself. He is in fact emblematic of the hard-to-pin-down author, as he was both physician and priest, sceptic and believer, obscene and reverent. Levi names Rabelais as one of his literary influences in *Le ricerche delle radici*, and in an essay in *L'altrui mestiere* entitled "Francois Rabelais," Levi dubs him "mon maître." In discussing the complications of Rabelais's masterpiece, Levi says the following of Rabelais himself: "The life of Rabelais, as far as we know it, is a tangle of contradictions, a whirlwind of apparently incompatible activities, incompatible as well with the image of the author that is traditionally reconstructed from the writings."<sup>3</sup>

Through the topic that Rabelais discusses in this passage, which frames Levi's text, we see that the subject of the monstrous has been established as being as central to Levi's stories as it is to Rabelais's *Gargantua*. In the Rabelaisian passage, a strong connection is established between literary genealogies and monstrous generation, a thematic juxtaposition that will serve Levi's text well. The choice of Rabelais as both an epigraph and a literary and thematic model for monstrous childbirth carries with it the weight of Rabelais's own anxieties concerning literary genealogies and models. Carla Freccero, in her study *Father*

*Figures: Genealogy and Narrative Structure in Rabelais*, makes the following statement about these tensions: "a predicament of filial succession structures Rabelais's narrative, even as it constitutes the themes: of the writer as author of 'his' book, of the narrator as royal historiographer, of the son Pantagruel and his gigantic father Gargantua."<sup>4</sup> By citing the instance of Gargantua's birth in Rabelais's text, Levi is in fact drawing upon the highly charged moment of the establishment of the dynasty Gargantua-Pantagruel, a moment that is intertwined with and dependent upon the thematic model provided by Pliny's text. Levi is entering into Rabelais's "predicament of filial succession" as well through this choice, for this epigraph can be seen as constitutive of Levi's own themes even as it simultaneously undermines them through parody.

The questions raised by this epigraph are thus complex: it would appear that Levi is creating an ironic framing of his own text, or perhaps emulating Rabelais's elusiveness, declaring his own text to be lies. Is he setting up distinctions, or, even worse, similarities, between lying, or fiction, and the empirical world of science? Does this epigraph function as a technique for embracing contradictions that provides Levi with an equivocal approach to his own difficult, ambiguous topic? Even while he adopts and pluralizes Pliny's title, Levi, though his choice of Rabelais, rejects Pliny as his sole source for the topic of monstrous childbirth.<sup>5</sup> Using Rabelais as a frame for his text furnishes a way for Levi to enter the world of science fiction, pure fantasy, leaving behind the world of his own empiricism and Pliny's; this device also provides him with a model of the scientist turned writer. If we look at the double theme of the Rabelaisian citation, it appears that both topics are relevant to Levi's text: the subject of monstrous birth and Rabelais's formulation of the writer as liar, the potentially threatened and threatening believability of the story when there is no empirical proof. But unlike Rabelais, Levi chooses many subjects that are not so far from a possible future reality, and he has declared his *storie* as multiple, in opposition to Pliny's singular *History*.

One of Levi's tales in *Storie naturali*, entitled "Angelica Farfalla," illustrates more precisely what is at stake in the double theme and the double frame of the epigraph. Here he creates a scenario in which monstrous generation is achieved through the nazification of science. The story illustrates as well the role of literary and cultural genealogies as models in the propagation of the monstrous.

In this tale, we go back in time to the period immediately following World War II. Levi does not specify either the time period or the country where the story takes place; he evokes the postwar period rather than stating it explicitly. Nonetheless, the place is easily identifiable as postwar Germany. A team of Allied researchers, consisting of a Frenchman, an American, a Russian, and an Englishman, go to a bombed-out neighborhood to verify a rumor about a grotesque medical experiment that had purportedly taken place there. The first line of the story alludes to a lack of rapport between the researchers: "They sat in the jeep, stiff and silent: they'd been living together for two months, but there

was not much familiarity among them.”<sup>6</sup> The reference to lack of ease or trust can be understood as referring to uncomfortable relations between the Allied countries at the end of the war, and also between members of the scientific community. The latter interpretation is strengthened when the reader learns, on the next page, that the group uses German as their common language. Not only the language of the defeated oppressor, German is also a major language of the scientific community then and now, but what constitutes “community” is thrown into question by this apparent rupture in mutual comprehension. The story thus begins in balance between two poles of reference: one political and the other scientific. Any potential distance between the two groups and sets of issues they raise is problematized by this juxtaposition and by Levi’s implicit questioning of their solidarity. The use of German also suggests an appropriation of the defeated genocidal culture, based on the exigencies of the political situation as well as those of the scientific community. It further suggests the impossibility of truly moving away from either, as Levi’s story will demonstrate.

Levi has divided the story into two parts. The first details the political environment and lays out the scientific experiment, the second deals with events and repercussions resulting from the science. Four prisoners, whom we assume are either Jewish or belong to another group singled out for extermination by the Nazis, have been victims of a scientific experiment designed to imitate the axototl, a salamander-like creature that lives in Mexican lakes. The colonel, who explains the experiment to the others, calls the creature an “intolerable heresy,” a “biological scandal,” and a “little monster”<sup>7</sup> because of its uncanny ability to reproduce at the larval stage. Called neoteny, this ability obviates the need for the next stage in life: if a butterfly, for example, reproduces at the larval stage, why turn into a butterfly? Neoteny bypasses the biological imperative of reproduction, thus rendering further stages of life superfluous. From the neoteny of the axototl, Professor Leeb, the Nazi scientist who designed the experiment, concluded that other species may also be capable of neoteny. The colonel continues explaining Leeb’s theories, found in a manuscript that the scientist left behind, to the team of researchers: “That this condition is not as exceptional as it might seem: that other animals, many perhaps, all perhaps, perhaps also man, have something in reserve, a potentiality. A further capacity for development. That unquestionably they are in a preliminary stage, a tentative drafting stage, and can become ‘other,’ and don’t do so only because death intervenes beforehand. That, in short, we too are neotenic” (p. 22).<sup>8</sup>

Leeb’s basic theory is that if the thyroid extracts of the axototl are administered, a molting will take place before the death of the subject: in other words, the subject of the experiment will turn into a creature with a potential second stage of life. Leeb’s manuscript details the theoretical bases for the concept of neoteny. It also states that he is carrying out some modest experimentation along these lines in a civilian dwelling and provides the address. When, after the war, the manuscript is found, it leads the team to the experiment

and its remains: "On the floor was a layer of foul rags, wastepaper, bones, feathers and fruit peels; there were large reddish brown stains . . . in one corner, a small heap of an undefinable material, dry, white and gray; it smelled of ammonia and rotten eggs and swarmed with worms. 'Herrenvolk!' the Russian said with contempt" (p. 20). When these samples are analyzed, the colonel announces that he has found everything in them: "blood, cement, cat piss and mouse piss, sauerkraut, beer—in short, the quintessence of Germany" (p. 21).<sup>9</sup>

The research team attempts to reconstruct the experiment by evaluating the remains found in the apartment. But that analysis, evidenced by the Russian's remark and the colonel's, must be based on more than an objective assessment of the facts. Because of the confusing hybrid nature of the residue, their analysis must depend to some degree on their cultural/political assessment of the situation. Terms such as "Herrenvolk" and "the quintessence of Germany" reflect their analysis of the political agenda underlying the scientific one. Their disdainful understanding of the political milieu in which these remains are found allow the colonel and the Russian to understand, while at the same time distancing themselves from, the tainted, suspect nature of the remains as scientific artifacts. They are thus able to account for the fact that Nazi scientific ideology has polluted physical evidence to the point of creating mad hybrid mixtures. These remains are basically unreadable without the explanation afforded by Leeb's manuscript.

The research team has found a woman named Gertrude, who used to live across the way from the apartment house where the experiment took place. At the end of the story, she comes to the police station to tell her side of the events. "Angelica Farfalla" follows the structure of a mystery. Only after we learn the scientific lesson of neoteny do we learn the fate of its victims, as her testimony reveals:

In 1943 there arrived a small military truck: four men in uniform and four in civilian clothes got out of it. The civilians were very thin and did not lift their heads; two were men and two were women. . . . I was very curious, but my father kept saying, "Leave it alone, don't bother with what's going on in there. For us Germans the less we know, the better." Then came the bombings; the house at number twenty-six remained standing, but the blasts shattered the windows. The first time, in the room on the second story we saw the four people lying on the floor on pallets. They were covered as though it were winter, while actually during those days it was exceptionally hot. They seemed to be dead or asleep. . . . [T]he second time, there were no longer pallets and the people were gone. There were four poles placed across the room halfway up and on them roosted four ugly beasts . . . four birds: they looked like vultures, although I've only seen vultures at the cinema. They were frightened, and they let out terrifying cries. . . . [W]e couldn't see the heads very

well because our windows were too far up, but they were anything but beautiful and very scary. . . . [T]he end of the war came, and everyone was hungry. One night we saw a lot of people talking in the street, in front of number twenty-six. Then one of them opened the door and they all went inside, jostling one another. So I said to my father, "Let me go see what's happening"; he made the usual remarks but I was hungry and so I went. When I got upstairs it was almost over. . . . [T]hey'd slaughtered them with clubs and knives and had already cut them up into pieces.<sup>10</sup> (p. 24)

The final paragraph of the story supplies an account of the end of Leeb: the official version is that he is dead, a suicide, but the colonel does not believe this. He comments, "men like him give up only when faced by failure. Whereas he, no matter how one may judge this dirty business, was not a failure" (p. 25).<sup>11</sup>

The manuscript that Leeb left behind provides a second source for the reconstruction of the scientific experiment, after the physical remains have been examined. Calling it "a very curious mixture of acute observations . . . extravagant and foggy theories, literary and mythological divagations, polemical suggestions saturated with malice, rampant adulation for the Very Important Persons of the period,"<sup>12</sup> the colonel recounts that the manuscript contains bizarre case histories as well as a chapter on "the iconography of angels and devils, from the Sumerians to Merlozzo of Forli and from Cimabue to Roualt." The manuscript asserts that "angels are not a fantastic invention nor supernatural beings nor a poetic dream but our future" (p. 23).<sup>13</sup> The points of reference for Leeb's hybrid model for the experiment shift around in an interdisciplinary frenzy between religion, art, science, and history. Citing cultural and artistic monuments, Leeb attempts to situate his own experiment within acceptable cultural bounds. To finish off this reconciliation of cultural history and his experiment, he quotes Dante as a religious and cultural authority. As the epigraph to his manuscript, Leeb used the following citation from Dante's *Purgatorio* X: "O vainglorious Christians, weary wretches who are sick in the mind's vision and put your trust in backward steps, do you not perceive that we are worms born to form the angelic butterfly that soars to judgement without defense? Why does your mind float so high, since you are as it were imperfect insects, like the worm that is undeveloped?"<sup>14</sup>

With Leeb's framing of his manuscript, Levi has furnished us with yet another literary and theoretical framework for his story. The very title, "Angelica Farfalla," refers to Leeb's epigraph, a relationship emphasized by Levi's capitalization of the word "farfalla."<sup>15</sup> Like the Rabelaisian epigraph that sets the tone for the entire collection of stories, this framing is hardly straightforward. It plunges the text into further complications through its distortion of Dante. The appeal of Leeb's experiment is that this potential second stage of life is a greater one, a glorious one: downright angelic. Leeb deliberately misreads the Dante. Aside from the more obvious problem of

playing God that Leeb's experiment raises, we have to recall that at this moment in Purgatory, Dante is being given a lesson about humility and pride.<sup>16</sup> Instead of understanding the message in Dante's text, Leeb takes on the role of the creator, unproblematically embracing the very hubris that Dante's text calls into question.

Leeb's misreading and misuse of Dante take us back to the issue of literary models already present in the Rabelaisian epigraph to Levi's collection of stories. Is Dante really the pertinent literary model for this story, either in terms of Leeb's appropriation of Dante for his epigraph or in terms of our understanding of Levi's title to this story? Is it a question of repairing "defective" humankind here, when we speak of the Nazis' assessment of and solution to the issue of "inferior racial groups"? Was Leeb's experiment then an altruistic effort to make angels out of Jews? Leeb's experiment was certainly not aimed at fostering the spiritual well-being of his victims, but rather to use them to further experimental science. In the context of this story, theoretical science is hardly progressive or redemptive; rather it is homicidal, dark, and tortured. Leeb's Dante is an ethical model to which the world of this science cannot possibly aspire, yet Leeb clearly uses it to justify his experiment. In this context, the Dante epigraph is set up as blasphemous.

With the recounting of Leeb's manuscript and its Dantean framing, Levi produces a critique through which the reader can evaluate the moral standing of the experiment. The most egregious sin that science commits here, through its agent Leeb, is precisely that of hubris: attempting to not only position itself next to art, next to high culture like that of Dante's—theological in nature and redemptive in intent—but to go so far as to create heavenly bodies as well.

Because of Leeb's prideful misreading, the Dante epigraph functions more as a screen than a gloss on Leeb's activities, hiding beneath it not only a much more relevant piece of history, but a model for medical experimentation as well. Once the obvious historical background of the story is considered, its title evokes not Dante but instead the figure of Josef Mengele, nicknamed the "Angel of Death." Mengele was the infamous head physician of Auschwitz, probably the most nefarious physician in the history of medicine. Chiefly responsible for deciding which people coming off the deportation trains would be killed immediately and which would work instead as slave laborers at Auschwitz until they perished, Mengele also oversaw and conducted inhumane medical experimentation at the camp, which usually resulted in the tortured death or permanent disfigurement of his victims. Nazi experiments were conducted under the pretext of furthering medical knowledge and research, and there have been debates up until the present day about the ethical implications of using the data that resulted from these experiments.<sup>17</sup> As Levi's tale ends in the horrendous death of Leeb's victims, a far cry from divine perfection, we see that these results are in fact much closer to what the name of Mengele evokes, as the story explores issues intimately related to the reality of Nazi medical experimentation.

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Levi's pessimistic ending to his story, his last words about Leeb, who, like Mengele, has disappeared after the war, are "I believe that if we were to search thoroughly, we would find him, and perhaps not all that far away; I believe that we haven't heard the last of Professor Leeb" (p. 25).<sup>18</sup> This sentiment is applicable to Mengele as well, who hid in Paraguay and Bolivia for many years after the war, his existence an enigma, finally dying in 1979 from natural causes, still a free man. Only in 1986 was his identity definitively established.<sup>19</sup> What Levi's narrator says about Leeb, and indirectly about Mengele, goes beyond judgment of the acts of a single individual. It is applicable to the inhumane data and theories resulting from Nazi medicine as well. These data and theories are still in evidence, and still exist on the periphery of acceptable medical and ethical practice.<sup>20</sup>

If we now look back at the epigraph, Levi's choice of the subject of monstrous childbirth appears more relevant to the tale told here, but it is used much more literally than in Rabelais's rendition. An understanding of the issues of maternity/paternity that are involved help bridge the apparent gap between a fanciful and whimsical approach to monstrous generation and the all-too-serious one apparent in this story. The subject of monstrous childbirth that has Rabelais enthralled has been a major topos since Aristotle, and it was of particular and rather obsessive interest during the Renaissance. In her study *Monstrous Imagination*, Marie-Hélène Huet states that

a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination. Instead of reproducing the father's image, as Nature commands, the monstrous child bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother at the time of conception or during pregnancy. The resulting offspring carried the marks of her whims and fancy rather than the recognizable features of its legitimate genitor. The monster thus erased paternity and proclaimed the dangerous power of the female imagination.<sup>21</sup>

Huet gives the example of a woman who purportedly looked too long at a portrait of the religious figure of St. John the Baptist covered in furs: she gave birth to a hairy baby.<sup>22</sup> The mother's undifferentiated, blasphemous interpretation of the portrait is similar to the function Leeb performs in Levi's story: Leeb takes the words of Dante, which represent theology, too literally as he attempts to mimic divine creation. Leeb's maternal relation to his monsters is a crucial piece of the equation. Hidden from public view, the victims are metamorphosed into monsters. When their gestation is discovered, the unconcerned and hungry public destroys the products of conception through a semi-cannibalistic act. The status of this act as cannibalism is confused by the fact that the creatures are no longer fully recognizable as human beings—they are at least partially metamorphized into other creatures. Their heads, however, retain a semblance of masked human appearance, as Gertrude describes them:



"They resembled the heads of mummies that one sees in museums."<sup>23</sup> The ambiguity regarding the cannibalism reflects the victims' ambiguous state as hybrid humans/monsters. The neighbors, unconcerned bystanders during the war (to wit, Gertrude's father's statement "Leave it alone. . . . For us Germans the less we know, the better") but willing consumers just afterwards, are caught up in the web of ambiguity. This situation reflects the complexity of the issues surrounding bystander passivity and complicity and their relation to active collaboration, a critically important question for Levi that he engages elsewhere in his work.<sup>24</sup>

Leeb's maternal scientific imaginings, in combination with his selective use of scientific knowledge, led to an exercise of unbridled scientific imagination. Like the construction of the Tower of Babel, his attempt to transcend the human state to reach a higher plane failed as a catastrophe of hubris. But more than that, his experiment involved unwilling human victims and thus participated fully in the dehumanization and nazification of science during the Third Reich. Levi evokes a scenario of medical experimentation in which the theory is as monstrous as the ultimately deformed subject or victims of the theory: in fact, much more monstrous, as the victims of the theory remain innocent. Leeb functions as the mother of this grotesque childbirth, and so he shares in the essence of the monstrosity, as does his science. Monstrous childbirth is conceived in the epigraph to *Storie naturali*, but is born and devoured only through the infelicitous combination of Nazi ideology and science.<sup>25</sup>

In the introduction to *Monster Theory*, Joel Cohen has remarked that the monster always escapes.<sup>26</sup> The inevitability of the monster's escape, however, is in serious question in Levi's rendition, because the very identity of the monster shifts. Leeb created monsters out of human beings, but Levi shows the real monster to be on the first level dehumanized science, and on the second level the uncaring neighbors who were willing to eat the product of monstrous conception after having turned a blind eye during the war to those same victims' fate. Has the monster really escaped, and what does "escape" mean in this context? The false monsters, the victims, have achieved a false escape as they have been consumed. But Leeb, the real monster of the tale, has disappeared, perhaps to practice monstrous science once again. As the colonel says about him, "I believe that if we were to search thoroughly, we would find him, and perhaps not all that far away; I believe that we haven't heard the last of Professor Leeb." The colonel's use of the conditional tense is highly suggestive. He does not recommend that the researchers hunt for Leeb or that anyone will: in fact, he merely states that it would be possible to find him if anyone bothered to do so. The idea that no one will do so precisely constitutes the problem. The lack of commitment to ethical practices, the lack of concern on the part of the populace, and finally government indifference have all ultimately resulted in Leeb's escape; this suggests as well that times have not really changed since the end of the war.

Levi sets this up as an admonition to those who would believe that

history cannot repeat itself. It is not only the appearance of the monstrous that constitutes a problem. It is the resolution of the monstrous as well that demonstrates whether the underlying situation that created the monster is truly being confronted or, as in this case, merely disappears for the time being. Huet remarks that “several traditions linked the word ‘monster’ to the idea of showing or warning. One belief, following Augustine’s City of God, held that the word ‘monster’ derived from the Latin *monstrare*: to show, to display” (p. 6). The Augustinian tradition informs the Italian tradition, the one at the heart of Levi’s concept of the relationship between “mostro” and “mostrare.” The monster as warning, as demonstration of both the divine and the opposite of the divine, is more than relevant here to Levi’s tale of the marriage of bad politics and bad science. In Levi’s reading, monstrous science becomes one with the monstrosity of the Holocaust, as he demonstrates their theoretical and practical relationship. The racist scientific theory behind the Holocaust is the same theory that motivated, allowed, and encouraged medical experimentation on the prisoners. Robert Proctor, among other historians, has documented what he calls “the well-established fact of medical complicity in Nazi crimes.”<sup>27</sup> The specter of the eleven million who died in the Holocaust—people whose murders were committed largely through advanced technological and scientific knowledge, and the medical experimentation of that same era—lies behind Levi’s assessment of the dark potential of science.

After looking at the framing of Levi’s tale within its historical context, it becomes even clearer that the story stands in antithesis to Dante and his world of potential redemption. High culture is held up as an impossibility, but that very impossibility has its own lesson to impart. The two epigraphs, the first the legitimate one of Levi’s collection, the other found within a fictive framework, the Nazi scientist’s manuscript, appear to be quite different from one another, as the distance between Dante and Rabelais is enormous. However, perhaps the Rabelaisian model of the first epigraph is not so very different after all from Levi’s use of Dante: in the Rabelaisian epigraph, the activity of narration is centered around lying, a perceived failure of the text to impart truth or even try to do so. Levi’s use of Dante also underscores the notion of an elusive truth put into crisis. Ultimately Levi’s story marginalizes Dante as not only irrelevant but potentially misleading and dangerous: arrogant aspirations to becoming “angeliche farfalle” have led to imprisonment, medical experiments, death, and finally a kind of cannibalism involving the neighbors who were complicitous in Leeb’s crime. Levi thoroughly undermines any desired ironic reading of his text, set up through the Rabelaisian epigraph, by the sheer despondency of this *storia* only too *naturale*. In other words, in the sense of the potential harm that unethical science can do, no real lying is possible. The excesses referred to by Rabelais and documented by Pliny are all too achievable, and we as readers understand this because of our personal and historical knowledge of the Nazi era.

In this story, Levi effectively sets up a tension between the question of the believability of events raised by Rabelais in the epigraph and the historical

reality of the Holocaust. What sort of events are too horrible to be fully grasped? Those of fiction, represented by Rabelais, who makes fun of Pliny's truth claims, or those crimes perpetrated by the Third Reich? And what is at stake in our understanding of them? Levi's events lie somewhere in a most problematic middle, and he demonstrates just how complicated that middle ground is. What he describes in "Angelica Farfalla" is verisimilitude: neither wholly fictional, given the context, nor wholly believable, given the far-fetched scientific parameters of the experiment. This situation leaves the science that created Levi's monstrosities in a highly ambiguous space. Is Levi, himself engaged in scientific work during his long career as a chemist, launching a frontal attack on the morals and ethics of scientific experiment?

Even while this story would appear to constitute a major critique of scientific ambition, Levi uses two strategies to undermine his own attack. The first is accomplished through Levi's framing of Leeb's manuscript. Through his delineation of Leeb's sources for his experiment as misappropriations, the colonel effectively marginalizes the science used in the experiment.

The second strategy is a more complicated one: science, while still under fire, is fundamentally safe from a generalized critique because the experiment in question took place under Nazism and is so extreme in nature. The political setting for the experiment tends to mask what is wrong with the science itself. Yet at the same time, the very context that weakens the scientific critique also strengthens it: the harsh reality of the actual Nazi medical experiments that serve as a backdrop emphasizes the potential reality of what Levi describes, since the setting for the story is historical, not fictive. Levi has covered a lot of ground: from Rabelaisian irony about lying to Pliny's earnest anecdotes, from science so extreme that it situates itself as a creator of angels to the even-more-evil but very real Joseph Mengele as the subtext of the Dante citation. Through his strategy of framing and contextualizing, Levi effectively demonstrates that truth cannot or should not be harder to believe than fiction. Our understanding of the Third Reich as capable of anything further undermines the fictive status of this story.

Even given the complex frame and setting for his tale, and his own ambivalence about the subject, Levi's warning about the dangers of science comes through loud and clear. It is even found even in the similarity of names: "Leeb" and "Levi." The immediate problem may disappear for the time being, just as Leeb has disappeared, but the seduction of scientific knowledge and the potential abandonment of humane values and ethics will always be there to tempt another practitioner, perhaps in another time and another place, and perhaps not so far away. Levi underscores the dangers of misreading and misunderstanding in the story itself, in the epigraph contained within, and, finally, in the Rabelaisian epigraph framing the entire collection of stories. This emphasis on misreading functions as a warning regarding our understanding of history and the tendency of history to repeat itself. Levi's indictment of science as bloody and ruthless is historically tied to the Holocaust in this story, but

at the same time he makes it clear that the monsters of unethical science and bigotry are not only specific or limited to the Holocaust. They can return at any time.

## Notes

1. The one-volume English translation of most of these stories is entitled *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1990).
2. *The Complete Works of Francois Rabelais*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 20. Cited in Primo Levi, *Storie naturali*, in *Opere* (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), III:4.
3. "La vita stessa di Rabelais, per quanto se ne sa, é un intrico di contraddizioni, un turbine di attività apparentemente incompatibili fra loro e con l'immagine dell'autore che tradizionalmente si ricostruisce dai suoi scritti." Primo Levi, "Francois Rabelais," in *L'altrui mestiere* (*Opere*, III:601). Translation mine.
4. Carla Freccero, *Father Figures: Genealogy and Narrative Structure in Rabelais* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 6–7.
5. This preference suggests some affinities that go beyond the choice of an epigraph. Rabelais had medical training and was a practicing physician before turning to literature; Levi was a chemist before becoming a writer.
6. "sedevano nella jeep rigidi e silenziosi: facevano vita comune da due mesi, ma fra loro non c'era molta confidenza." Primo Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," in *Storie naturali* (*Opere*, III: 42). This translation and others from Levi, *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, trans. Rosenthal, p. 19. "Confidenza" is translated as "familiarity" by Rosenthal, but the word is really closer to being somewhere between "trust" and "ease."
7. "un'eresia intollerabile," "scandalo biologico," "mostriciattolo"; Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 45.
8. "Che questa condizione non sia così eccezionale come sembra: che altri animali, forse molti, forse tutti, forse anche l'uomo, abbiano qualcosa in serbo, una potenzialità, una ulteriore capacità di sviluppo. Che al di là di ogni sospetto, si trovino allo stato di abbozzi, di bruttecopie, e possano diventare "altri," e non lo diventino solo perché la morte interviene prima. Che, insomma, neotenicisti siamo anche noi." Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 46.
9. "Per terra era uno strato di stracci immondi, cartaccia, ossa, penne, bucce di frutta; grosse macchie rossobrune . . . in un angolo, un monticello di una materia indefinibile, bianca e grigia, secca: odorava di ammoniaca e di uova guaste e pullulava di vermi. 'Herrenvolk!'"—disse il russo con disprezzo"; Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 43. "Sangue, cemento, pipì di gatto e di topo, crauti, birra, la quintessenza della Germania, insomma"; Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 44.
10. "Nel settembre 1943 arrivò una camionetta militare: ne scesero quattro uomini in divisa e quattro in borghese. Erano molto magri e non alzavano il capo: erano due uomini e due donne. . . . Io ero molto curiosa, ma mio padre diceva sempre: 'Lascia andare . . . Noi tedeschi, meno cose sappiamo, meglio é.' Poi vennero i bombardamenti: la casa del numero 26 restò in piedi, ma due volte lo spostamento d'aria

sfondò le finestre. La prima volta . . . si vedevano. le quattro persone coricate per terra su dei pagliericci . . . sembrava che fossero morti o dormissero . . . la seconda volta, invece, non c'erano più né pagliericci né persone. C'erano quattro pali messi per traverso a mezza altezza, e quattro bestiacce posate sopra . . . quattro uccelli: sembravano avvolti . . . erano spaventati, e facevano dei versi terrificanti . . . le teste non si vedevano bene . . . ma non erano niente belle e facevano molta impressione . . . venne la fine della guerra, e tutti avevano fame. . . . Una notte vedemmo molta gente che parlava in strada, davanti al 26. Poi uno aprì la porta, e tutti entrarono spingendosi uno coll'altro . . . quando arrivai su era già quasi finito . . . gli avevano fatto la festa, con dei bastoni e dei coltelli, e li avevano già fatti a pezzi." Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," pp. 47–49.

11. "gli uomini come lui cedono solo davanti all'insuccesso, e lui invece, comunque si giudichi questa sporca faccenda, il successo lo ha avuto"; Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 49.
12. "una ben curiosa mistura di osservazioni acute . . . di teorie stravaganti e fumose, di divagazioni letterarie e mitologiche, di spunti polemici pieni di livore, di rampanti adulazioni a Persone Molto Importanti dell'epoca"; Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 46.
13. "la iconografia degli angeli e dei diavoli, dai Sumeri a Merlozzo da Forlì e da Cimabue a Roualt. . . . Gli angeli non sono una invenzione fantastica, né esseri soprannaturali, né un sogno poetico ma sono il nostro futuro." Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 46.
14. O superbi cristiani, miseri lassi,  
che, della vista della mente infermi,  
fidanza avete ne' retrosi passi,  
non v'accorgete voi che noi siam vermi  
nati a formar l'angelica farfalla,  
che vola a la giustizia senza schermi?  
Di che l'animo vostro in alto galla,  
poi siete quasi entomata in difetto,  
si come vermo in cui formazione falla?  
(pp. 121–29)

Translation from Dante's *Purgatorio*, trans. John D. Sinclair (London: Oxford University Press, 1939, 1977), p. 137.

15. Normally in Italian only the first word of a title is capitalized.
16. According to Mirna Cicioni, Levi's story is "a bitterly ironic recontextualization of Dante's admonishment to the souls of the proud in the first storey of Purgatory, about the need for imperfect humankind to strive to become closer to divine perfection." Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), pp. 64–65.
17. See Christian Pross, "Nazi Doctors, German Medicine, and Historical Truth," in *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code*, ed. George J. Annas and Michael A. Grodin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 32–52.
18. "credo che, cercando bene, lo si troverebbe, e forse non lontano; credo che del professor Leeb si risentirà parlare"; Levi, "Angelica Farfalla," p. 49.
19. Leeb is patterned after Mengele not only for his unethical medical experiments, but for his citation of Dante as well. One of Mengele's biographers informs us that Mengele "was well-read, a student of Dante" (Gerald Astor, *The "Last" Nazi: The Life and Times of Dr. Joseph Mengele* [New York: Donald I. Fine, 1985], p. 3).

The simultaneous existence of high culture and genocidal culture is one of the more disturbing characteristics of Auschwitz in particular and the Third Reich in general. Levi draws our attention to this paradox by modeling Leeb, his not-so-imaginary Nazi scientist, after Mengele.

20. See Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 298–312.
21. Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 1.
22. Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, p. 19.
23. “assomigliavano alle teste delle mummie che si vedono nei musei”; Levi, “Angelica Farfalla,” p. 48.
24. For example, see the preface to *Isommersi e I salvati* (The Drowned and the Saved), in which Levi speaks of the civilian collaboration of petty bureaucrats who sold crematoria and cyclon-B gas to the regime without asking questions.
25. Several studies have focused on the role of medical science, genetics, and anthropology in the Third Reich. See, for example, Annas and Grodin, eds., *Nazi Doctors*; Proctor, *Racial Hygiene*; and Benno Muller-Hill, *Murderous Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). For a discussion of the relationship between science and Nazism that does not exculpate science as having been somehow “tainted” by Nazism but rather looks for some ideological and institutional affinities, see Mario Biagioli, “Science, Modernity and the ‘Final Solution,’” in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 185–205.
26. Joel Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 4.
27. Robert Proctor, “Nazi Doctors, Racial Medicine, and Human Experimentation,” in Annas and Grodin, eds., *Nazi Doctors*, pp. 17–31, here, p. 17.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Monstrous Murder: Serial Killers and Detectives in Contemporary Italian Fiction*

ELLEN NERENBERG



Go to Italy. It's a peaceful country. Nothing ever happens there.

Dario Argento, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*

There are no other cases. I already told you once what I think about your theory of a "serial killer." Don't you see? Even the word is American and we're in Italy here, not the U.S. Here we call them *monsters* and they're like those guys who throw rocks onto the highways from the overpasses or those Calabrese guys who killed that little girl because they thought she was possessed by the devil. A serial killer? In *Modena*, yet, in *Emilia*!"

Carlo Lucarelli, *Lupo mannaro*

#### Introduction: Lanzarini, vox populi

Serial murder, State Prosecutor Lanzarini confidently informs us in Carlo Lucarelli's novel *Lupo mannaro*,<sup>1</sup> is an American phenomenon; it is not European, and it is decidedly not Italian. Indeed, serial murder is a concept so alien in Italy that no word in Italian exists to denote its perpetrator. "In Italy," Lanzarini says, "we call them *monsters*" (*mostri*) (emphasis in original). Something so *foreign* as the serial occurrence of ritualized murder does not require nominalization—a process that serves to familiarize linguistically and therefore makes the inconceivable cognitively assimilable—into Italian. Designating serial murderers as "monsters" accomplishes an important linguistic (not to mention psychical) operation. It transposes the unthinkable onto the irrational, Gothic, and fantastic terrain where monsters dwell, thus, setting it at a safer distance for an eventual contemplation that will diminish the "monsters" as the stuff of folklore ("they thought she was possessed by the devil"), dreams and nightmares, and artistic artifacts.

While Lanzarini is not wrong, he is not exactly right, either. Like the fictitious state prosecutor, and following the notion of a Foucauldian discursive

tic, the Italian press favors the appellation “monster” and has used it frequently in reportage concerning various incidences of serial murder in Italy.<sup>2</sup> Nearly all of the twenty-four murderers identified as “serial killers” were described as “monstrous” in the press. Geographically distributed throughout the Peninsula, they become a frightful, frightening legion: “the Monster of Genoa,” “the Monster of Valpolcevera,” “the Monster of Aosta,” “the Monster of Norma,” and “the Monster of Foligno,” to mention just a few. Perhaps the most celebrated case in Italy is that of Pietro Pacciani, the alleged “Monster of Florence.”<sup>3</sup> But while the popular press favors and publicizes the *monstrous* aspect of these killers, experts (among whose ranks the fabricated Lanzarini should number, incidentally) usually call such fiends “pluriomicidi” or “pluriassassini”—compounds that, because they indicate not the serial aspect of this kind of murder so much as its multiplicity, disallow a relationship between one homicide and another wherein murder occurs at regular intervals.<sup>4</sup>

As Lanzarini reminds us, “serial killer” is an American term, not to mention an American obsession.<sup>5</sup> Of the undeniable presence of serial killers in the United States, and the infinite stories they generate, James Kincaid has asked a series of heuristically helpful questions: “What are we doing . . . with serial killers? Why do we construct them as we do? What do they represent for us? What stories do they allow us to circulate? What conditions of knowing do they generate? What needs do they bring into being and then serve? What cultural itches do they scratch?”<sup>6</sup> My question, particularized for the Italian situation, concerns the need to *disavow* the presence of serial killing in Italy, a need that Lucarelli and, I believe, writers like him exploit in their “pulp” fiction of violence. To recast Kincaid’s question: what are we doing *without* serial killers? How can we live without them? If it is true, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben believes, that we have become denizens of a global culture, it is a commodity culture that knows no national boundaries. As denizens, how could we hope to be beyond the violence so pervasive in the other geographical outposts consuming this culture? Parallel to the increased relays between disparate sites for the production of culture made possible by the current state of global communication, the markets for literature in translation and cinema have increased without any apparent regard for the need to explain cultural differences.<sup>7</sup> The literature of horror writers like Clive Barker and Stephen King, and the work of filmmakers like Dario Argento, David Cronenberg, David Lynch, and Quentin Tarantino,<sup>8</sup> go to nearly immediate release in other countries, Italy among them. This extra-peninsular influence on the “pulpisti” is so indisputable that it warrants no lengthy rehearsal or justification here.<sup>9</sup> The central question I contemplate in the cases that follow is this: by repudiating the existence of its serial killers, what kinds of stories concerning Italy do we foster and allow to circulate?

Clearly, Lucarelli, Argento, and others trafficking in splatter pulp aim at an ironic representation of the bucolic Italy of yore. With no arcadian remnants, the Italy discursively created by a faction of contemporary cultural practitioners is one in which serial killers, and other transcultural and multinationally



commodified monsters, gambol and frolic.<sup>10</sup> Recognized materially by the wake of victims real serial killers leave behind them, or produced phantasmatically by (among others) the discursive industries of pornography and fashion, the monsters I inspect here fetishize skin and, by extension, the body politic, training on its assailable places and violating them.

The recent fiction published in Italy, in Italian, with the interchangeable names of splatter and pulp, predicates on the trope of excess, on a notion of containment as absent as the Arcadia it derides.<sup>11</sup> Violence—like the horror this body of work describes—is extreme, excessive, and unrestrainable. It seeps from the pages very much in the way blood flows out from under the shredded skin of the many victims of violence that populate its pages. The skin of these victims, like social tissue, is explicitly rent away from the body to expose the fragility that lies beneath.<sup>12</sup> Skin is peeled away in a variety of monstrous methods of both human means (fingernails cum claws; teeth, vampiric canines) and man-made ones (e.g., knives, bullets, or machetes). Revealed beneath is a vulnerability not limited to urban centers, where violence is commonplace and even expected, but that has spread to more remote, once pastoral, locales.<sup>13</sup>

The account of “the Monster of Florence,” the first case introduced, serves as a template in numerous ways. First, as the most notorious instance of serial murder in Italy, the case of Pietro Pacciani seriously challenges the claim that serial murder is not an Italian phenomenon. Second, we notice the serial nature of the case and the meaning that unfolds from it. Third, we attend to the topography of the series, noting the relation the discrete murders have to the series and the nearby city of Florence. Significantly, this is not a Jack-the-Ripper style urban nightmare, for all the murders occur in places that, if not exactly the hinterland, are at least locales removed from urban centers. Finally, we note the posture of the law and its officers, for many count as failure the law’s inability to explain, resolve, and contain the Pacciani case.<sup>14</sup>

### Son of S.A.M.: Pietro Pacciani and Imbrications of Serial Murder

In the opening segment of Nanni Moretti’s 1994 film *Caro Diario*, entitled “In vespa,” the director-protagonist samples some of the offerings of Rome’s movie theaters during the idle summer months. The selections are uninviting: monotonous, talky Italian films; drab pornography; slasher pictures. Of the choices available, Moretti (unsurprisingly) opts first for a fabricated (and bad) Italian film, reminiscent of his own *Ecce Bombo* (1978), and then a slasher/horror picture. As he will in other junctures of this first segment, Moretti liberally mixes the real with the represented. The camera follows the director into the theater as he watches *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, John McNaughton’s cult splatter flick from 1990. Appalled—but also fascinated—by its badness, Moretti devotes entire pages in his diary, the film’s structural conceit, to reproducing the favorable reviews that led him to attend the film in the first place. In one of “In vespa’s” most successful scenes he imagines visiting a critic’s house and reading

aloud to him his reviews: a kind of bedtime story sure to induce the nightmares the socially irresponsible critic deserves.

Structurally, this scene performs an important function, for as Moretti collects delicious hatchet-job film reviews so does he gather up news clippings of other kinds of events. In a cinematic maneuver worthy of remark, and one that also characterizes his 1998 release *Aprile*, "In vespa" transforms from sheer fantasy to quasi-documentary quite literally from one shot to the next. From the fantasy scene of the critic's bedroom we cut to one entirely different. Positioned over the director's shoulder, the camera shows Moretti's hands in close-up sifting through newspaper clippings. Unlike the preceding segment, however, the focus here is on the newspapers themselves, not the ubiquitous filmmaker. The clippings are, in fact, *cronaca* reports from *Il Manifesto*, *Il corriere della sera*, and other Italian dailies that tell the story of Pier Paolo Pasolini's violent end. The finale of "In vespa" achieves a synthesis of both style and form. Reflecting the narrative structure of *Caro Diario* as a whole, Moretti's "vespa" thematizes the hybridity that typifies his diary, filled as it is with diary-type entries (including reflections, fantasies, and so forth), as well as film reviews, and, perhaps, news reports of other events like Pasolini's murder. Within the narrative structure of this episode, the director's "vespa" functions as a traveling synthesizer, bridging the *aporia* in his travelogue of Rome's neighborhoods, from Garbatella to Monteverde, from the now bucolic scene of the violent ending to Pasolini's own "violent life." But more than a narrative suturing device, the "vespa" travels between other modal poles, between fiction and *cronaca*, between narrative and documentary cinema.

Similar imbrications make up the logarithms of the Pacciani case. Until his death in early 1998 forever ended any further active investigation of his involvement in the seven double-homicides that occurred around Florence between 1974 and 1985, the case against Pietro Pacciani hesitated between fact and fiction; like the monstrous, it hovered somewhere in the transom between rumor and reality.<sup>15</sup> The relays between these registers in the Pacciani case, like the fictional narratives I take up below, reveal a disquieting slippage between the ostensibly neat divisions of the real and the represented.

The "monster event" in Florence generates two stories that, although by now inextricably connected by way of historical circumstance, must be considered as discrete narratives. The first story is the one that unfolds from the series of seven (or eight) double-homicides. The second concerns the story of the investigation of the crimes, in particular that of Pietro Pacciani, an agricultural worker and the state's prime "monstrous" suspect. Although very few people doubt that the fourteen or sixteen grisly homicides withal constitute a series, a colossal dispute erupted surrounding the identity of the killer. For even though the state proposed and the media promoted the theory of a lone killer, contradictory evidence emerged during the course of the investigation that made this theory increasingly untenable.

Typically, the list of murders and the locations of the murder scenes reads as follows:

September 9, 1974. Borgo San Lorenzo.

Victims: Stefania Pettini and Pasquale Gentilcore.

June 6, 1981. Bacciano (aka "the Scandicci murders").

Victims: Carmela de Nuccio and Giovanni Foggi.

September 22, 1981. Calenzano.

Victims: Susanna Cambi and Stefano Baldi.

June 19, 1982. Montespertoli.

Victims: Antonella Migliorini and Stefano Mainardi.

September 9, 1983. Galluzzo.

Victims: Horst Meyer and Uwe Rusch.

July 29, 1984. Vicchio.

Victims: Pia Gilda Rontini and Claudio Stefanacci.

August 9, 1985. Scopeti.

Victims: Nadine Mauriot and Jean-Michel Kraveichili.<sup>16</sup>

The circumstances of death appear significantly similar: the victims died from gunshot wounds, out-of-doors in remote areas called "garçonnières," in their cars, in a condition of partial undress, either at the beginning or in the middle of sexual activity, and in a state of complete surprise. In each case the couple was killed with a .22 caliber Beretta that fired a Winchester Long Rifle Series H bullet.<sup>17</sup> In a significant number of the cases, the car's glove compartment was left open and the female victim's purse had been rifled through. All the DNA evidence (in the form of semen or blood) that was recovered belonged to one of the victims and thus could not have been attributed to the murderer. In a significant number of cases the female victim's pubis had been sheared off with what appeared to be either a hunting knife or some kind of surgical instrument. Also in a significant number of cases the female victim's left breast was removed using what was apparently a similar instrument.

Not long after the police mobilized the "Squadra anti mostro" (or the S.A.M.; in English, the anti-monster team), Pacciani emerged as a suspect. As will become clear, it was an unsurprising turn of events. However awful a person he was (and the demonstrated and repeated physical abuse of his wife and the sexual abuse of his daughters, for which he served a prison term in the late 1980s, supply ample evidence for his "monstrousness"), the state's case against Pacciani for the series of murders is riddled with lacunae, some not so serious, others that assail the integral logic of the prosecution. Indeed, as an article in the weekly news magazine *Panorama* claimed, the Pacciani trial transformed the murders into one of the "cases that divided Italy."<sup>18</sup>

The bleed between the categories of the real and the imagined troubles the Pacciani case and characterizes the relationship of actual serial violence to its

representation.<sup>19</sup> For my purposes, I consider matters of police investigation and especially the recuperation of forensic evidence as “real,” and rumor, speculation, and popular cultural expressions as “imaginary” effects. Real and material issues vexing to the Pacciani affair include some of the following questions: Where is the murder weapon? For, after a legendarily long and thorough search and seizure (*maxiperquisizione*) of Pacciani’s property, the *carabinieri* did not succeed in locating the .22 Beretta used in the murders. The handle of a revolver, wrapped in rags, was recovered in a building on Pacciani’s property, but its origin mystified the investigation. Since he was in prison at the time it was discovered, Pacciani could not have hidden it there himself and the police could not determine who did. Does the slip of paper with “couple” and a license-plate number written on it point to a wider circuit of voyeurs (*guardoni*), who traded information along with pornography, and is it possible this circle is involved in the crimes?<sup>20</sup> Who wrote and sent a letter to the *carabinieri* implicating Pacciani? Could it have been his own daughters, as retribution for the endless abuse they sustained at his hands, like some “vendetta in famiglia”? The “*maxiperquisizione*” also yielded a blank notebook, manufactured in Germany and unavailable in Italy. Where did it come from? Could it have belonged to either Horst Meyer or Uwe Rusch, killed in Galluzzo in 1983?

This small yet troubling trail of paper and rags hearkens back to other rags that really confound the Pacciani case. Pietro Pacciani’s indictment for the murder of the ragman (*cenciaiolo*) Severino Bonini in 1951 functions as a pivot between sporadically connected registers, swinging between fact and amalgamated suppositions, many of them spurious. On April 11, 1951, in Tassinaia, Pacciani stabbed to death Bonini, whom he discovered in *flagrante delicto* with Pacciani’s fiancée Miranda Bugli. Prosecutors for the investigation of the serial murders between 1974 and 1985 harvested this crime, calling attention to the rage Pacciani would likely have felt at the exposure of Miranda’s left breast and linking this “primal” scene to the excised left breasts of the female victims. In the 1951 case, the Court of Assizes at Florence was swayed by the argument that Miranda incited Pacciani by claiming Bonini was raping her; the court convicted them both, Pacciani of homicide and aggravated theft (*furto aggravato*), and Miranda Bugli of being an accessory to murder. She was sentenced to six years, he to twenty-two, though he was paroled in 1964 for good conduct.

Just as the state used the Bonini episode to launch its action against Pacciani for the series of double-homicides, the press established its case on the same, very loamy, ground. As Giuseppe Alessandri tells us, “the *monstrous* crime of the Tassinaia” (emphasis added), became a legend in its own right; it was even popularized in a ballad declaimed by the performer Giubba throughout the Vicchio-Mugello area. In fact, Giubba’s ballad achieved such popularity that Florence’s Vallecchi Press published it in broadsheet complete with two illustrations: one of Bonini and Bugli espied by Pacciani and the other of Pacciani hauling Bonini’s corpse through the woods.<sup>21</sup> How long did this image

of Pacciani's homicidal rage pervade the area around Florence? Can we say it revisited the second trial and that, in effect, the press and police reports tried Pacciani twice for the same crime? Was Pacciani tried in front of the citizens of Florence before the Court of Assizes was able to hand down a sentence?<sup>22</sup> Obviously, these speculative questions cannot be answered, but they reveal some of the mechanisms at work in a system where reality and rumor overlap.

The 1951 murder became the basis upon which seriality was founded. In its second moment of heightened public interest, Bonini's murder became the logical beginning for the explanation of Pacciani's murderous compulsion.<sup>23</sup> At this juncture, Nino Filastò (in his eminently thoughtful account, *Pacciani innocente*) puts forth the simplest criticism and the one most injurious to the logic by which the case proceeded. If, as the police and the prosecution claimed, the work of "the Monster" expressed sexual perversion, then why did the court fail to appoint a psychiatrist to evaluate Pacciani (during what would have been the customary psychiatric evaluation) so that it might certify this supposed "perversion"?

Addressing the presumed connection between the circumstances that produced the murder of Bonini and the series of double-homicides, Filastò also flags the kind of monstrous blurring of monstrosity that operated both throughout the prosecution's presentation of the case in court and in the reportage, where Pacciani's history of abuse and interest in pornography featured prominently.<sup>24</sup> The *modus operandi* simply does not fit Pacciani's profile, Filastò argues. "The maniac," he observes

manifests a ferocious hatred of woman as such, of the woman who is first killed and then, with regard to her sexualized character, degraded, the opposite of the person who uses women to satisfy his sexual desire. The excision of the pubis expresses the ferocious desire to deprive the woman of her femininity, which could not be seen in greater contrast to that which Pacciani does in the period following the crimes: (for him) women are used as sexual objects, not something to be rendered formless, sexless, and indistinguishable.<sup>25</sup>

"Così è la legge un cazzo!"  
(Taking a bite at/the bite out of the law)

It's modern civilization, this godless civilization, that makes men attach such importance to their own skins. One's skin is the only thing that counts now. The only certain, tangible, undeniable thing is one's skin. It's the only thing we possess, the only thing that's our own. . . . Everything is made of human skin. Men no longer fight for honor, freedom, and justice. They fight for their skins. Their loathsome skins.<sup>26</sup>

"A serial killer in Emilia Romagna! In Lambrusco country?" (*LM*, p. 51). No one believes that the succession of wrongful deaths of young, female, drug addicts constitutes the work of a serial killer. No one, that is, save Inspector Romeo, who suspects that one killer is responsible for the corpses of the young women with throats slashed and bearing human bite marks. In a way, Prosecutor Lanzarini is right once again: no series of murders has occurred in Modena proper. But Romeo and his unit trace the Via Emilia, the region's principal traffic corridor that is lined with the shanty towns of "extracomunitari" (illegal aliens) and provides the main conduit through the region for the traffic in women and narcotics. As one of Romeo's men observes, "In effect you can see this region as one huge city that stretches from Reggio to Cattolica . . . a kind of Los Angeles with several million inhabitants and Via Emilia as an enormous surface *on the road*" (*LM*, p. 51).<sup>27</sup>

The roving killer, affluent engineer Mario Velasco, does not elude the police for long. The author contrasts the killer and Romeo, the detective on his trail. Wealthy, married, and with two children, Velasco lacks affect almost entirely; like the "monstrous" Eichmann Arendt describes, he appears "terribly and terrifyingly normal."<sup>28</sup> Apart from the nefarious murders, Velasco operates within or even according to the letter of the law. For example, he presents himself with his attorney at the precinct house to inquire into the charges brought against him. Assured that he is no longer under suspicion, he continues with the business of his daily life, even surprising Romeo and Grazia, the inspector's sidekick at the office (and, more recently, in bed), as they surveil him illegally. Opposed to this picture of deadly calm we have Romeo, a certifiable wreck. Recently diagnosed with "insonnia familiare letale," a chronic and, it seems, ultimately terminal form of insomnia, Romeo suffers throughout the novel from sleeplessness and from the side effects of medication to counteract it.<sup>29</sup>

The contrast in character not only anticipates Romeo's demise, it structurally guarantees the failure of his inquest. With no official command to continue the investigation, Romeo cannot link any of the evidence (e.g., the length of the belt used to strangle the victims, the eyewitness's account of the license plate, or even the size of incisors in the dental cast) to his prime suspect. Ever imperturbable, the engineer realizes Romeo and Grazia have finally grasped the only possible link between him and the murders: Monica Pasini, a young woman reported missing in 1987, whose remains, Romeo is convinced, are hidden on Velasco's property. A cursory (and illicit) inspection of the engineer's house verifies what the architectural plans expose: the cellar is the only possible hiding place. After days of wakefulness and stakeout outside Velasco's apartment house, sleep finally overcomes Romeo. Waking quickly in his car, he discovers his error and, in a succession of quick maneuvers, rushes the engineer and his house. This impulsive act reveals nothing extraordinary except the cellar floor the engineer has only just completed paving over with cement. The novel's climax and quick denouement ushers in the police department's official sanction of Romeo for pursuing a private and law-abiding citizen

without cause and authority, which results in his suspension from the force and compelled early retirement.

Romeo's public censure and subsequent dismissal are not the only examples of the ways *Lupo mannaro* works to rebuke organs of law, law enforcement, and social regulation. Early on, Romeo loses a material witness, Emir Ben Abid, a Senegalese immigrant who had seen a black Mercedes at the latest murder, and who has successfully provided the police with a partial license-plate number, proving Velasco's ownership of the car and placing him at the murder. Despite such useful corroboration, however, the "extracomunitario" is quickly processed for deportation. "Così è la legge, dottore" (That's the law, boss), one of his officers tells him. When Romeo, who cannot overlook the facilitation of several levels of police organization, explodes "Così è la legge un cazzo!" (*LM*, p. 34) (That's the law, my ass!), he illustrates the inadequacy of the law and the inefficacy of legal investigation. The killer observes rules and the novel leaves him free to roam the interregional arteries to kill again. Romeo, by contrast, although a member of the police force, performs his role outside legal purview and is punished for it.

In *Lupo mannaro*, the piercing of the victims' skin betokens the vulnerability of *social* tissue, something the law cannot even protect, not to mention embody or reinforce.<sup>30</sup> Killing for pleasure is no longer extraordinary or limited to the subjectivity of an individual like a "Freikorps" soldier, who, as Klaus Theweleit demonstrated in *Male Fantasies*, killed with the impunity his "armored body" afforded. Rather, as Mark Seltzer points out, a more pervasive subjectivity of violence, imposed from without like a "social substitute skin," has replaced it.<sup>31</sup> As Julia Kristeva elaborated in *The Powers of Horror*, the skin contains the "abject"—that which the body will expel, and the subject's revulsion at which functions so vitally in the dynamic of horror.<sup>32</sup> No dam, the skin is hymenal, permeable, penetrable, able to be ruptured, able to heal, but whose scar, as Freud himself says, will endlessly serve as the trace of the wound. And crime itself is abject, Kristeva reminds us: "Any crime, because it draws attention to the frailty of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such frailty."<sup>33</sup> In this relation to the abject, the monstrous also points to the other salient condition of abjectivity, the notion of excess, in whose economy the violence of the recent cannibal fiction in Italy functions.<sup>34</sup> Such fetishization of skin by serial killers and the representation of this phenomenon may help produce the conditions of disavowal I described above: a nation as wary as Italy of segmentation of the body—at least inasmuch as organ donation demonstrates this tendency—would find alarming indeed the surfeit of skin situated at the intersection of serial killing and the monstrous.<sup>35</sup>

Skin (and its perforation) fascinates Romeo and Velasco equally, although from opposing positions.<sup>36</sup> Romeo defends his station within the organ of the law, against Velasco's impinging and external force. Thus Velasco's position resembles Phillip Jenkins's formulation of the serial killer as the menacing

"other," who "fulfill[s] a critical social function in defining conventional morality and behavior by providing a ne plus ultra against which normal society readily finds common ground," but, in a wider context he represents the difficulties intrinsic to "othering" *tout court*.<sup>37</sup>

Drawn to the bite marks exhibited on one of the cadavers during the coroner's inquest, Romeo sees "The bluish signs of the teeth on the girl's legs, the violet holes that dig into her skin in a tight, deep, perfectly circular crown. And I see them on her buttocks, numerous and dark, when the doctor grabs her by the arm with a soft, flat crack to turn her on the marble tabletop, something that surprises me" (*LM*, p. 19). Although Velasco understands why he kills, he fails to discern the compulsion to bite his victims. Killing the young women, he coolly tells the inspector, "makes me feel better. . . . It's a way of eliminating stress and in a manager's job you accumulate a lot of it" (*LM*, p. 64). On the other hand, "The only thing I don't know," he tells Romeo during their colloquy, "is why I bite them" (*LM*, pp. 65–66). Lucarelli hints at vampirism by referring to Velasco's skin, which Romeo finds "strange." Like the milky, preternaturally youthful skin of a nocturnal vampire, the engineer's is "Smooth and rosy, almost without wrinkles, taut like that of a child" (*LM*, p. 38). Thus, framing the biting as vampiric (not lycanthropic, as the title *Lupo mannaro* [Werewolf] might suggest), Lucarelli permits one monster to bleed, as it were, into another. That the bites are located not only on the victim's throat, the mythic and familiar point of the vampire's entry, but also on the legs and buttocks illustrates just how formidable is this method of assault; it necessitates no orifice to violate or rape: skin is everywhere and, therefore, everywhere violable.<sup>38</sup>

Skin, skinning, and even another insomniac investigator also appear in Eraldo Baldini's *Bambine*. In Ravenna, journalist Carlo Bertelli, another insomniac, comes closest to establishing the "identikit" of the killer. As in Lucarelli's *Lupo mannaro*, the murderer, credited with the abduction, rape, bludgeoning, and scalping of little girls, goes unapprehended. Seriality builds in two ways in this novel. The killer, probably a neurosurgeon from Ferrara—though Baldini categorically denies the reader any presentation of him—makes his gruesome way from one young victim to the next. Although Bertelli personally knows none of the casualties, their accumulation in a series implicates his own series of losses: sleep, his youth, his pristine Ravenna, his marriage, his father, his best friend Luca. As Lucarelli had occasion to do in *Lupo mannaro*, so does Baldini refer overtly to the Florentine case in this novel. Citing the removal of body parts (the left breast and the pubis) in the murders attributed to "the Monster of Florence," Baldini draws our attention to the scalping of the beautiful "bambine." What does the skinning of these young victims suggest? The scalps appear as ghastly trophies for the killer's hapless go-between in crime, the wanderer Salvo Gremmi, who pastes them on the heads of dolls, so remarkable for their inanimateness, that accompany him on his rounds of Ravenna. Gremmi's "motofurgone" is the first thing Carlo spies at the beginning of the novel.



I saw him ahead of me . . . and affixed to a tube that circled the top part of the cab, at about a meter and a half, there were those things. Those fetishes, it occurred to me. Dolls and dollies of discolored plastic, perhaps gathered from some dump, or from along the banks of one of the many canals in the area, where the current often leaves refuse. I saw their hair wave in the breeze. They seemed, I thought with a shiver, like tiny, nude, macabre trophies.<sup>39</sup>

Baldini underscores what is at once quintessentially abject and feminized. Richard Tithecott reminds us that “The motivation of serial killers is frequently explained in terms of the need to expel: to expel the feminine, to expel the homosexual.”<sup>40</sup> Merely the serial killer’s factotum, Gremmi feels little need to render abject that which Page du Bois has described in *Torture and Truth: The New Ancient World* as the container for the elusive, veiled truth.<sup>41</sup> Like some masochistic counterpart, Gremmi *retrieves* that which the killer feels the “need to expel,” reclaiming the dolls from the ash heap of “things thrown out.” These jettisoned dolls, once the toys of projection (of maternity? sorority? friendship?) of—very likely—little girls, are as dead and discarded, as feminized and abject, as the victims whose hair ghoulishly adorns their heads.<sup>42</sup>

These pretty dolls, fetishes once more, incarnate the fashion models of Andrea Pinketts’s beautiful and complex *Il senso della frase*. All three of Pinketts’s novels—*Lazzaro vieni fuori*, *Il vizio dell’agnello*, and especially *Il senso della frase*—exhibit traits of the monstrous and feature a legal apparatus unable to account for or resolve it.<sup>43</sup> Set in and around contemporary Milan, these novels set the stage for the antics and ruminations of amateur detective Lazzaro Sant’Andrea. Milan of the 1990s, home to domestic and international fashion titans, produces series upon series and, in Pinketts’s text, one series is embedded within and implicates another. First, withal, his books constitute a series for junior detective Lazzaro, for we see him practice his detective skills and improve them through repetition. Second, each book concerns a series of crimes, serial murder more often than not.

Monsters appear in extreme shapes and sizes in Pinketts’s novels. Wherever Lazzaro happens to stray (within or without nocturnal Milan, his primary beat) he encounters the grotesque: the abnormally tiny (midgets—principally in *Il vizio dell’agnello*), the abnormally huge (giants, in *Lazzaro vieni fuori* and *Il senso della frase*), and characters sporting all manner of noticeable disfigurements. The grotesque players pave the way for the series of monstrous crimes occurring in each of the three novels: a succession of dead children in *Lazzaro vieni fuori*, a train of poisoned homeless people throughout Milan in *Il vizio dell’agnello*, and a sequence of murders in *Il senso della frase* that at first seem unrelated but ultimately serve to re-dimension our notion of series and serial murder.

Like Lucarelli’s and Baldini’s novels, *Il senso della frase* displays scarce respect for the law and little faith that standard legal or police practice will

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unravel intricate cases like those presented by serial murder. As evidence of mistrust in the law we are presented with Lazzaro's opinion of the murderer: "I don't want to denounce him [to authorities]. I want to punish him" (*SF*, p. 214). In this novel, Lazzaro's considerable "senso della frase," his way with words, leads him to the case of the vanished pathological liar Nicky.

Nicky the liar, daughter of, she says, Joan Collins and an Italian painter, has disappeared from the Milan club circuit, and Lazzaro misses her. Not a beautiful woman, Nicky admirably passes as the most desirable woman in the White Bear, a gathering place for Milan's international fashion industry. The walls of the White Bear, in Via Vincenzo Monti, are papered with the composites of the clientele. "Vincenzo Monti as a poet," Lazzaro tells us,

has never been any great shakes, but Via Vincenzo Monti is the street in which life and death ideally conjoin. Life is represented by the bars in which the American models, starved for cappuccinos and the covers of fashion magazines, park themselves. Death is found in the somberness of Via Vincenzo Monti. The street is like this: the meeting place of Eros and Thanatos. I'd spent entire days at the White Bear, years ago. . . . [T]he bar was vast, and the walls were papered with the composites of the models, male and female. *A human tapestry.* Photos from the past and the present. At least a couple of years had passed since I'd set foot there, and it had changed hands at least a couple of times. But none of the new owners had dared to remove the photos of the Wisconsin beauties who were now God knows where. . . . *The composites were like the shellacked photos on headstones.* The certificate of beauty and hibernation. (*SF*, pp. 37–38; emphases added)

Nicky, though she could never land a modeling job because of her unorthodox looks, has her "book" made and her head-shots distributed. Lazzaro repeatedly refers to her resemblance to a "prehistoric bird" with her "hooked nose." In a book where women adopt the identities of others with confusing fluidity, Nicky's nose is her distinguishing attribute. It also leads to her untimely end. Searching for the absent Nicky leads Lazzaro through a series of series in decembrine Milan: sisters pretending to be each other, cousins pretending to be sisters, women of no relation pretending to be sisters, a sequence of goon Santa Clauses, porn stars, and on and on. His way with words ultimately leads Lazzaro to Olegario Bizzi, monster in the making.<sup>44</sup>

Although Milan seems to produce nothing but serials, reproductions, and simulacra, a phenomenon Pinketts makes all the clearer for the backdrop of the fashion industry's objectification of the body, serial murder itself is once again relegated to the provinces, this time to Bizzi's town of Mona, near Vicenza. Bizzi's wife Amelia, long dead, and Nicky are the banal casualties of sadomasochism, but they have also primed his pump, for now he has developed

a taste for homicide and relishes the murder of the homeless man, Barbaro Zanotto, whom he ritually crucifies.

When Bizzi turns on the lights in his warehouse, at the novel's climax, Lazzaro bears visual witness to the man's obsession. Pinketts draws Mona and Milan, the warehouse and the White Bear into proximity as he narrates Bizzi's wall of photomontage.<sup>45</sup> The photographic evidence on the walls details an endless succession of human deformity and mutilation, explicitly corresponding to the other wall, in Via Vincenzo Monti, with its photographic series of a different stripe but of the same spectatorial fascination and fetishization.<sup>46</sup> Bizzi switches on the light.

The room was flooded in light. The walls existed. They showed murals of gigantic photographs. The photos showed different subjects, subjects reduced to objects for the most part. There were blindfolds, whips, chains, forceps. It would have been a scene of the most banal sadomasochistic stuff if not for the subjects. . . . Every type of deformity was present, from the most innocuous to the most shocking. There were women without limbs, dwarfs, giantesses, all shown in poses hovering between pain and pleasure. The stomach of one young woman, who wore a black mask and tight clothespins on her nipples, was so enormous that all you could see beneath it were her knees. The face of another model looked like pulp, raw and red. Her lumpy chin was so huge and deformed it would have been impossible for her to move her jaws. (*SF* p. 232)

Pinketts's Via Vincenzo Monti recalls Lucarelli's use of the Via Emilia in *Lupo mannaro*. Both thoroughfares have urban origins that stretch far into and across outlying areas. The Via Emilia permits Bologna's urban unruliness to stretch into the pastoral area of "Lambrusco country." For Pinketts, Via Vincenzo Monti slices across Milan's extraurban areas, drawing into proximity Bizzi's fetishized violence in the Po hinterland and the fashion industry's fetishization of the body in the center of Milan. Lazzaro observes that Via Vincenzo Monti is the place where "Eros and Thanatos" intersect, and, at its erotic provenance in Milan, the fashion industry enacts its symbolic murder of the models, objectifying the body through endless photographs to the point where the models' composites "were like the shellacked photos on headstones" (*SF* pp. 37–38). A set of exchanges takes place at Via Vincenzo Monti's figurative terminus in Mona: Thanatos replaces Eros, repetition cedes to seriality of the sort that characterizes ritual murder, and the restitution of the body achieves a chilling and singular effect. In place of Milan's fragmentation and subsequent fetishization of body parts by way of the close photographic focus that contributes to the "disciplinary apparatus of fashion" photography, Mona reinstates the body entire.<sup>47</sup> The fetishization of the part transforms into the fetishization of the complete, colossal (the photos are "in gigantografie," wall-size prints),

*monstrous* whole. The welter of deformities Bizzi's warehouse wall chronicles discloses that which drew Nicky's murderer to her: her non-standardly beautiful "hooked nose," equal in its attractive power to the skin like "red pulp" of the model/victim whose image strikes Lazzaro so powerfully.

The skin of the deformed model marks the confluence of "pulp" and "fiction." Skin, Curzio Malaparte wrote, "is the only thing that counts." What draws all these texts together, what establishes among them a series, and what fits them under the rubric of pulp fiction is the fetishization of skin and of the body, whether in the commodity structure of the fashion industry or the economy of the monstrous, trained as it is on the abject (Malaparte's "repellent skin"), the Gothic, and the unspeakable.

Like the Moretti revealed in *Caro Diario*, Italy and Italians are repelled but at the same time fascinated by serial killers. In the variegated style of Moretti's film they disregard the boundaries of fantasy and *cronaca*, fashioning a complex, blurry vision of serial murder that dismisses it as "monstrous." Availing the construction of the monstrous in Italy, the skin-mongering serial killers in the print of newspapers and novels travel freely between the competing realms of representation and experience, history and fiction. However much the nation, with its bulwark of language, folklore, and fantasy, would care to pave over their existence—by running together, say, the graphemes "pluri" and "omicida"—these serial killers emerge, as if from the interstices between Lanzarini's iterated "serial killer," to puncture, slash, and eat away at the delicate skin of the body politic.

## Appendix

"Delitto a Tassinai di Vicchio,  
sorprende la fidanzata con l'amante;  
uccide il rivale a colpi di coltello."

Un grande tragico fatto è avvenuto  
nel Comune di Vicchio nel Mugello  
un giovanotto iniquo e fello  
che a sentirlo ne desta pietà.

Tal Pier Pacciani ha ventisei anni  
che a parlarne il sangue si ghiaccia  
lui sta a Paterno poder detto l'Aiaccia  
oh sentite tutto quello che fa.

La ragazza si chiama Miranda  
che è l'amante di Pier e ne dà la prova  
lei sta a Villore detto Casanova  
su il colle vicino a Maiol.

(Crime at Tassinai in Vicchio, [he] surprises  
his fiancée with her lover; and stabs the rival  
to death.)

(A great tragedy has occurred  
in the Town of Vicchio in the Mugello,  
[by] a youth so wicked and bad  
that hearing of it arouses compassion.

This Pier Pacciani is twenty-six,  
and to speak of it makes the blood run cold;  
he lives at Paterno in a farm called Aiaccia;  
oh, listen to what he does.

The girl is called Miranda,  
and she is Pier's lover and shows it;  
she lives in Villore, called Casanova,  
on a hill near Maiol.

A quattordici anni la pastorella  
una sua avventura nel bosco  
in lei niente c'era di nascosto  
prematura donna rendeva lei già.

Da tanto tempo lui conosceva  
così tanto si era innamorato  
che da breve si era fidanzato  
alla giovane le disse così.

"Io ti amo così pazzamente  
ed anche tu mi vorrai contraccambiare  
quel che fu non ne voglio parlare  
all'avvenire pensaci tu."

E per breve trascorse l'amore  
e da qui il fatto avviene ritroso  
lui divenne tanto geloso  
interi giorni la stava abbadar.

L'undici aprile un sol di primavera  
tal Severino venditore ambulante  
di cenci e pelle da case tante e tante  
anche da Casanova come il solito passò.

I familiari della Miranda  
son le tredici lo invitano a pranzare  
dopo pranzo via volle andare  
a Poggiosecco si deve recar.

La sedicenne Miranda pastorella  
il suo gregge nel bosco a pascolare  
lui nel passar la volle chiamare  
sbuca la macchia e la va vicino.

Accanto a lei si mette seduto  
per abbracciarla ne dà di piglio  
e non sapeva che lì c'è un nascondiglio  
il Pacciani che stava a sentir.

A questo punto Bonini Severino  
non riesce a esser tanto audace  
fa un tentativo e riesce capace  
e la donzella alla gioia si dà.

Il fidanzato che più non resiste  
inferocito sorte dal cespuglio  
e vol far strage proprio nel miscuglio  
disse "ambedute vi voglio ammazzar."

At fourteen years this young shepherdess  
had her own adventure in the woods,  
and she hid nothing, for  
she was already older than her years.

For some time he knew  
that he was so in love with her  
that they were soon promised,  
and so he said to her:

"I love you so wildly  
[like] you want me to;  
I don't want to talk about the past,  
I'll leave you to plan the future."

And their love was short-lived,  
and the deed now turns wayward;  
he became so jealous that  
he hung around her days on end.

April 11th and a spring sun.  
This Severino, traveling ragman,  
often passes many houses,  
including the one at Casanova.

At one p.m. the family of Miranda  
invite him to eat,  
and after lunch he wanted to leave,  
for he had to get to Poggiosecco.

The sixteen-year-old shepherdess Miranda  
takes her fold to the woods to graze,  
and in passing he calls out to her,  
starts through the thicket, and draws near.

He sits down next to her  
and moves to embrace her;  
he didn't realize that through a  
peephole Pacciani was watching.

Here Severino Bonini  
isn't so bold;  
he makes a move and succeeds,  
and the young girl gives herself over.

The fiancé can stand it no longer;  
he emerges enraged from the bush  
and, wanting a bloodbath,  
says to them both "I want to kill you."

Col coltello a serra manico  
il sanguinario come fe' Caino  
questo squilibrato paccianino  
diciannove colpi su lui vibrò.

Così lasciava il Bonini straziato  
che di salto la ragazza afferrava  
lei con questo suo udir si salvava  
dice "Pierino presto ci sposerem."

Lui rispose "se sposi saremo"  
s'immutava e la volle abbracciare  
"giura a nessuno di non rivelare  
quel che è stato nessuno lo sa."

Lui tornava dopo mezzanotte  
a caricarselo con le gambe al collo  
come può fare la volpe a un pollo  
trecento metri così lo trascinò.

La mattina a Vicchio era il mercato  
lui tranquillo come a mene frego  
in una bottega di un certo Pellegro  
molti lo videro bere e giocare.

Ma purtroppo la cosa s'inoltrava  
per Bonini ognuno era allarmato  
a Tassinaia venne ritrovato  
tra le foglie nascosto così.

Giovanotti all'amore voi fate  
è bene ognuno abbia la fidanzata  
ma se sapete che è donna depravata  
come il Pacciani non dovete far.<sup>48</sup>

With a serrated blade,  
in a bloodbath like Cain's,  
this unhinged Pacciani  
delivers nineteen blows.

Thus he leaves Bonini in pieces  
and, bounding toward the girl, he grabs her;  
she with these words saves herself:  
"Pierino, soon we will wed."

"If we will be married," he says,  
altering his mood and embracing her,  
"swear that to no one you will tell  
what has happened here and no one will  
know."

He returned after midnight  
and took his burden, its legs round his neck,  
like the fox with a chicken,  
and in this way dragged the dead Bonini  
three hundred meters.

The next day was market day in Vicchio,  
and he as carefree as Riley;  
many saw him drink and play cards  
in Pellegro's place.

But alas the deed developed,  
and all were worried about Bonini;  
and he was found hidden in the thicket  
at Tassinaia.

You young folk, if you make love,  
it's good that every guy have his girl,  
but if you know she's perverted,  
don't do like Pacciani did.)

## Notes

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to this genre, thanks to Jacqueline Reich and the staff at Kim's Video in New York City (Bleecker Street). Special thanks are owed the staff at Feltrinelli Books in Bologna, but chiefly in Florence (Via dei Cerretani), and especially to Andrea and Leonardo.

1. Carlo Lucarelli, *Lupo mannaro* (Rome: Edizioni Theoria, 1994), p. 33. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LM*, followed by the page number. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. Cf. Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 211.
3. For information regarding these various cases, see Marina Garbesi, *I serial killers* (Rome: Edizioni Theoria, 1996). We might also add "the Monster of Verona" in addition to the as yet anonymous "Monster of Rome," who kills gay men—among them, possibly, the very popular figure Walter Haymann, also known as "Mago Maghella," a self-proclaimed psychic. As Marilena Bussolotti reported for *Panorama* (January 17, 1993, p. 65), "Not even the carabinieri exclude a serial killer." As I finish this essay in April 1998, the crimes of "the Monster of Genoa" have saturated the Italian dailies.
4. "Assassinio seriale" is also, albeit seldom, used. In the rapidly expanding bibliography concerning serial killers and popular culture (construed largely as American or northern European), see Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex-Crime* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987); Steven A. Egger, *The Killers Among Us: An Examination of Serial Killers* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997); Carla Freccero, "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*," *Diacritics* 27.2 (Summer 1997): 44–58; Stephen Giannangelo, *The Psychopathology of Serial Murder: A Theory of Violence* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996); Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994); Richard Tithecott, *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffery Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); and especially Mark Seltzer's brilliant *Serial Killers: Death and Life in American Wound Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998). I thank Barbara Spackman for bringing Freccero's work to my attention.
5. "Serial killer" was first coined by F.B.I. Special Agent Robert Ressler, whose accounts of tracking celebrated serial killers have enjoyed tremendous popularity in the U.S. market. See Mark Seltzer, "Serial Killers (I)," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 5.1 (1993): 93.
6. Cited in Richard Tithecott, *Of Men and Monsters*, p. ix.
7. Consider the kind of cultural "morphing" Elaine Chang studies in the intersection of "Japanese" and "Italian" ethnic identities, put into question by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. See Elaine Chang, "Spaghetti Eastern: Mutating Mass Culture, Transforming Ethnicity," in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, eds. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 292–96.
8. Consider Raffaella Krismer's homage to non-Italian sources in *Il Signore della Carne* (Milan: Zelig, 1997), which includes epigraphs from the literature of Clive Barker and J. D. Salinger, and an indebtedness to cinema based on Clive Barker's horror stories. In a forthcoming article I will more fully examine this emerging literary genre in Italy in relation to the already well-established cinematic genre of horror

and its subgenre, the slasher picture, in a global forum as well as its Italian ambit. Insofar as this last is concerned, it would be well to remember Dario Argento's participation not only in the global market of "cult-splatter" but in that projected onto Italy's small screen, including the television series with the working title *La porta sul buio*, on which Argento collaborated and which featured four one-hour segments that were produced in 1972 and shown on the RAI the following year. Similarly, *Giallo* ran on RAI Due from October 1987 to January 1988, featuring nine episodes of *Gli incubi di Dario Argento* and fifteen episodes of *Turno di notte*. The last were fifteen-minute segments based on the mysteries encountered and solved by three returning characters, all taxi drivers: Calypso 9, Rosso 27, and Tango 28. The program was hosted by Enzo Tortora in the Friday, 8:30 p.m. time slot. This genre evidently still appeals, for now Carlo Lucarelli hosts a program based on unsolved crimes that shows on the RAI. I thank Giorgio Rimondi for bringing this to my attention. For Argento's filmography see Alan Jones, *Mondo Argento* (Cambs, England: Midnight Media, 1997) and Fabio Maiello, *Intervista a Dario Argento: L'occhio che uccide* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1996). For critical evaluation of Argento, see Jacqueline Reich in this collection, and Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 73–83.

9. Fabio Giovannini and Antonio Tentori, in their introduction to the collection *Cuore di pulp* (Rome: Stampa alternativa, n.d.), fall into the trap of the fantasy of origins. Pulp is Italian, they seem to say, instead of, as I believe, constitutive of an ever-globalizing market for "splatter-pulp-horror," called in Italy "cannibal" fiction. In other words, by attempting to recuperate a national identity for pulp, italianizing it through an analysis that focuses on origins, these two critics lose sight of the worldwide theater of horror where national distinctions make very little difference.

The Internet offers increasingly infinite resources on this topic; for the legacy of splatter/punk, see, among others, Alessandro Cavalieri, URL: Giulio Mozzi, "Splatterpunk," *Nautilus* (Electronic Magazine). URL: Fabio Nardini, "Giovannini, Fabio: Cyberpunk," URL: <http://www.comune.roma.it/COMUNE/bbs/foun...ic.html/ita/edf/giovannini-cyberpunk.html>; and the anonymously authored Web site, "I nipotini di Tarantino specchio di un'Italia 'cannibale.'" URL: <http://www.cyberlogic.it/abitare/Dic96>. For the Italian literary establishment's reception of the "pulpisti," see Cinzia Fiori, "Eco, un controllore da controllare," *Corriere della sera* (September 12, 1996, np); and her "Ribelli immaginari," *Corriere della sera* (December 14, 1996:25); Sabastiano Vassalli, "I giovani narratori," *Corriere della sera* (December 14, 1996:24); and especially Umberto Eco, "Il primo dovere degli intellettuali. Stare zitti quando non servono a nulla." *L'Espresso* (April 24, 1997:226), for whom this recent literature served as a point of departure for substantial reflection on its potential social engagement. See especially Antonio Tabucchi's response to Eco, "Un fiammifero Minerva: Considerazioni a caldo sulla figura dell'intellettuale indirizzate ad Adriano Soffri" (*MicroMega* February 1997, pp. 1–13), later reprised in his *La gastrite di Minerva* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1998).

10. Skipping ahead momentarily, we might consider the representation of Miranda, the complicit and "perverted" "pastorella" (shepherdess) of Giubba's ballad that spread the notoriety of Pietro Pacciani's 1951 crime throughout the Mugello area outside Florence. Cf. the appendix.



11. For a useful distinction between this phenomenon and its earlier incarnation, "splatterpunk," see Giulio Mozzi's "Splatterpunk."
  12. Skin appears in Beverly Allen's framing of the "body politic." She notes that "the figurative body politic, subject to constant reconstitutions and undoings by violent acts and discursive practices, shows up as a *membranous* entity, adjusting here and there, feeling uncomfortable in its (libidinous?) osmoses if earlier it had been accustomed to the corset of clear state powers and clear oppositions." Beverly Allen, "They're Not Children Anymore: The Novelization of 'Italians' and 'Terrorism,'" in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 61; emphasis added. Mark Seltzer investigates the topic of skin thoroughly in *Serial Killers*, pp. 96–98.
  13. In some cases, the skin and flesh are eaten, consumed by the cannibals popular enough in this emerging genre to have given title to one its anthologies, *Gioventù cannibale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997). The presence of the consumption endemic to cannibalism towers, at the same time menacing and funny, in Krismer's *Il signore della carne*. Lucarelli's 1997 *Almost Blue* (Turin: Einaudi) focuses specifically on the serial murders of the "Iguana," who morphs from one killing to the next, stepping into the skin (even down to the detail of fingerprints) of his victims.  
 In her review of Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Fay Weldon attributes the upset the novel generated to the horror at the "tide[s] of the city" that wash over the corpses of Bateman's victims, removing them from sight and obliterating Bateman's crime (cited in Carla Freccero, "Historical Violence.") However, to differ with Weldon's "surprise," we remember, with Seltzer, that such modernist disquiet (and such urban terror) has been true at least since Robert Musil warped the Moosburger case into the fabric of *A Man without Qualities*.
  14. Roberto Benigni's 1995 *Il Mostro* satirically sends up a legal apparatus that, unable to apprehend a serial killer at large in suburban Tuscany, mistakes a hapless con man (played by Benigni himself) for the murderer.
  15. Some controversy remains as to whether a double-homicide committed in 1968 should be included in the series.
  16. Compiled using Nino Filastò, *Pacciani Innocente* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 1994); Giuseppe Alessandri, *La leggenda del Vampa: La storia del mostro di Firenze* (Florence: Loggia de' Lanzi, 1995); and Francesco Ferri, *Il caso Pacciani: storia di una colonna infame?* (Florence: Edizioni Pananti, 1996). *Compagni di sangue* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1998), a study coauthored by Carlo Lucarelli and Michele Guittari that appeared in May 1998, was published too late for me to incorporate into this essay.
  17. Francesco Ferri, president of the Court of Appeals that overturned Pacciani's guilty verdict, points out that although the forensic evidence overwhelmingly supported two claims—a unique individual performed the mutilations and the same weapon using the same type of bullet was used for the murders—it was impossible to determine whether the hand that held the gun and pulled the trigger was the same that mutilated the corpses. See Francesco Ferri, *Il caso Pacciani*, pp. 17–26. Perhaps only coincidentally, Seltzer also looks to the Winchester Rifle as a source of the machinery of serial murder. See Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, pp. 201–3.
  18. See Ferdinando Camon, "Comunque un mostro," *Panorama*, November 4, 1994, p. 61.
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19. On the simultaneity of repetitive violence and its representation, see Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, pp. 93–99, and Richard Tithecott, *Of Men and Monsters*, p. 10, *passim*. Glossing Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Seltzer writes that “the content of the unconscious is defined essentially as representation.” That is, the understanding of the unconscious as the scene of representation does not merely posit the subject as spectator, but therefore implicitly posits the priority of the subject to, and its ‘proper’ distance from, its representations and identifications.” Thus repetition (the cardinal element of serial murder) evacuates meaning from the “content” of the crime scene. For more on this deliberate blurring of media representations of serial killing and serial killers’ enactment of media representations, see Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, pp. 151 and 171.
20. For a critique of pornography’s cumbersome association with violence against women see Laura Kipnis, “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 373–91. See also Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, pp. 185–90.
21. Giuseppe Alessandri, *La leggenda del Vampa: La storia del mostro di Firenze* (Florence: Loggia de’ Lanzi, 1995), pp. 30–31. The ballad is reproduced here in the appendix.
22. Italian law requires that the defendant stand trial within the jurisdiction of both the “giudice naturale” (natural judge) and geographical region in which the crime took place. I am grateful to the Hon. Emilio Gironi of the Corte di Cassazione for this clarification.

According to Nino Filastò, Dr. Ruggero Perugini, the director of the S.A.M.—who trained at the F.B.I.’s Behavioral Science Unit in Quantico—published his own account, *Un uomo abbastanza normale*, before the case against Pacciani had concluded. Further, if Alessandri’s audacious structuring of *La leggenda del Vampa* (published the year following the trial) appears to link Pacciani unproblematically to the murders by way of the Bonini homicide, it should be remembered that the Florentine daily *La Nazione* had made that connection seem matter-of-fact. An additional point of comparison should be drawn between these published texts and the recent study, *Compagni di Sangue* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1998) coauthored by Carlo Lucarelli and Michele Giuttari. Like Perugini, Giuttari was also involved in the investigation of the Pacciani case, particularly as regards the “compagni di merenda,” the group of friends Pacciani used as an alibi and whom, by extension, he also implicated.

23. Both Alessandri and Filastò refer to Miranda Bugli’s testimony in the seven-month-long court case in 1994. Cf. Giuseppe Alessandri, *La leggenda del Vampa* and Nino Filastò, *Pacciani Innocente*, *passim*.
24. The circumstantial evidence accumulated easily. Pacciani’s interest in pornography, the sexual abuse of his daughters, and the money in his bank account that seemed not to correspond to his means of remuneration as a farm laborer all worked together to advance the case against him. The most shameless conjecture is found in Alessandri’s account, where he writes that he believes Pacciani drew inspiration for the 1983 murders from the film showing at the time at Florence’s Cinema Nazionale in Via dei Cimatori: William Lustig’s *Maniac*, concerning a murderer who adorns his mannequins with wigs made from the scalps of his victims.

25. Filastò, *Pacciani Innocente*, pp. 102–3. It is worthwhile remembering Susanna Moore's 1995 novel *In the Cut*, as Seltzer recently has. This novel of serial murder, told from the point of view of the female victim, gives us this death scene: "Then I cut her throat so she would not scream. . . . At this time I wanted to cut her body so she would not look like a person and destroy her so she would not exist. I began to cut on her body. I remember cutting her breasts off. After this, all I remember is that I kept cutting her body. I did not rape the girl. I only wanted to destroy her." Cited in Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, p. 194.
26. Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*, tr. David Moore (Marlboro, Vt.: Marlboro Press, 1952), p. 126. N.B.: In the Italian, Malaparte, writing in the immediate postwar period, uses the word "schifosa," which actually means "disgusting" or "repellent" more than it does "loathsome," which construes as more passive.
27. That two of the murders attributed to "the Monster of Genoa" should have taken place on the Ferrovie dello Stato (the state railway) reinforces the link between travel and serial murder that Lucarelli ironizes (and adumbrates) here. Cf. various articles covering the "killer delle donne" in *La Repubblica*, May 1998.
28. Cited in Judith Halberstam, "Skinflick: Posthuman Gender" in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*, "Camera Obscura" 27 (September 1991): 37–53.
29. In his sleepless state, Romeo resembles another of Lucarelli's disheveled detectives, Commissario De Luca, of the trilogy *Carta bianca*, *L'estate torbida*, and *Via delle Oche* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1990, 1991, and 1996, respectively). Grazia returns as the lead inspector in Lucarelli's recently published *Almost Blue*.
30. Carla Freccero reminds us that Patrick Bateman, the narrator-protagonist-serial-killer of *American Psycho*, works for the aptly named Wall Street firm of Pierce and Pierce. See Freccero, "Historical Violence," 51.
31. Seltzer writes: "[T]he social ego [is] formed from the outside in, its social substitute skin forming its insectlike exoskeleton. And this is exactly the ego of the kind one finds described, again and again, in accounts of the serial killer. If the serial killer . . . 'fades back,' chameleonlike, 'into society,' he seems to depend utterly on the support of this social exoskeleton." See Mark Seltzer, "Serial Killers (II): 'The Pathological Public Sphere,'" *Critical Inquiry* 22.1 (1995): 147–48; emphasis added. Thus the quest for and conquest of the victim's skin could be seen as a literalization of this mechanism.
32. Kristeva puts it this way: "It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of 'one's own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its 'own and clean self.'" Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 53.
33. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4. Cf. Mary Douglas, who observes that "reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death." Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Conceptions of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 5.
34. Jame Gumb, the serial killer known as "Buffalo Bill" in both Thomas Harris's book *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and Jonathan Demme's film of three years later (popular in Italy as *Il Silenzio degli innocenti*), skins his victims; the story's

other serial killer, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, flays and skins his victims, consuming what lies beneath. In her excellent, if ultimately too-optimistic reading of this film, Elizabeth Young believes that skin functions as the sign pointing to "a second model of gender . . . that offers a critique of sexual difference by transcending, rather than exaggerating, traditional oppositions between genders. . . . Thus, even as these two killers enact forms of violence against women, they also, in the objects and forms of their crimes, translate physical violence from a gender-specific act to a potentially unisexual set of bodily violations." Elizabeth Young, "The Silence of the Lambs and the Flaying of Feminist Theory," *Camera Obscura* 27 (Sept. 1991):5–35. The notion that the rending of skin can sign a more neutral system wherein violence strikes irrespective of gender will be interrogated at the end of this essay in my consideration of the fashion industry as portrayed in Pinkett's *Il Senso della frase*.

35. Of Italians' attitudes about organ donation, Allen and Russo write that "Belying their reputation as a consummately generous people, the Italians have the smallest donor bank of all developed countries. According to press reports, it is simply not the national custom to give up organs. Is there a shared revulsion to giving up or receiving parts of the body as 'natural symbols' of the nation?" Allen and Russo, *Revisioning Italy*, p. 2. For "natural symbols," see Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Pantheon, Penguin, 1970).
36. Again, *Almost Blue* offers excellent comparison. Grazia, now a principal, witnesses the "Iguana's" morphing. The "Iguana" is Alessio Crotti, escaped inmate of a psychiatric hospital, who "looks for a mask" (p. 96) and goes to extremes (piercing, slashing) to morph into the skin of his latest victim. After learning about Alessio's childhood fantasy concerning dragons, Grazia believes he sheds his skin like another, smaller dragon, the salamander or the iguana. In an entertaining send-up of the fourth estate, which includes accurate mock-ups of the front pages of such dailies as *Il resto di Carlino*, *La Repubblica*, and *Il Messaggero*, Lucarelli, himself a journalist as well as a fiction writer, shows how "Iguana" sticks as the press's monstrous nickname.
37. Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994), p. 112.
38. Velasco's figuration as vampire also speaks to Bram Stoker's use of Dracula as a critique of capital. For this critique, see Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1993). Further, the fear of violation from without corresponds to Seltzer's assertion that the social subject is "in a state of shock" due to the trauma of repetitive violence coeval with the machine age. "One might say that the subject of shock or trauma is thus inseparable from the notion of the cultural construction or historical determination of the subject as such, the subject *determined from the outside in*." Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, p. 124, n. 21; emphasis in original.
39. Eraldo Baldini, *Bambine* (Rome: Ritmi Theoria, 1995), pp. 15–16.
40. Tithcott, *Of Men and Monsters*, p. 57.
41. Page Du Bois writes in *Torture and Truth: The New Ancient World*: "The female body—among others—is still represented as the locus of truth . . . and the philosophical subject needs to find the truth, needs to locate truth elsewhere in the body of another, employs torture or sexual abuse against the other because he finds that

he does not know the truth, because the truth has been defined as a secret . . . one that eludes the subject, must be discovered, unveiled and that truth will continue to beckon the torturer, the sexual abuser, who will find in the other—slave, woman, revolutionary—silent or not, secret or not, the receding phantasm of a truth that must be hunted down, extracted, torn out in torture.” Cited in Freccero, “Historical Violence,” pp. 146–47.

42. Gremmi’s recycling tendencies correspond significantly to the presumed killer in Mauro Covacich’s *Colpo di Lama* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1995)—a man named Lama, whose remarkable ability to reclaim Pordenone’s discarded flotsam makes him an attractive candidate for a specialized welfare program.
43. Hereafter I will refer to *Il senso della frase* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995), my focal text, as *SF* and supply the page number parenthetically.
44. *Il senso della frase* makes Olegario Bizzi’s monstrousness patent on numerous occasions: “Olegario is the name of *that monster*” (p. 162); “I’ve seen him, he’s horrible. Two meters high, like I said, and he looks like a giant vulture” (p. 162); Ulli “Seemed enthusiastic. But when I was obliged to tell her that in order to do me a favor she would have had to bait a probable serial killer two meters tall she hung up” (p. 169); and finally, like a fetching Frankenstein, Lazzaro sees that “Olegario was, sure, a jumble of incompatible features but taken altogether it was a patchwork of singular beauty” (p. 183).
45. Although Andrew Cunanan was described by authorities as a “spree killer,” his assassination of Gianni Versace in 1997 can be viewed as the “glamorous” finale to a series of other murders spanning the North American continent, and it offers another example of the short interval between murder by numbers (as serial murder is sometimes called) and the (Italian and global) fashion industry. But other examples of serial killing’s relationship to the world of fashion exist. Consider *American Psycho*, where, as both Seltzer and Freccero point out, Bateman’s “hardbodied,” male-model good looks correspond to his monomaniacal interest in the “Surface, surface, surface” of the body-objects of his victims. It is perhaps not accidental that the new releases of Jay MacInerney and Bret Easton Ellis (out late in 1998) both concern the fashion world in New York City. Bear in mind also Irvin Kershner’s 1978 film *The Eyes of Laura Mars* and, from the progenitor of Italian gothic cinema Mario Bava, the hilariously awful *Hatchet for the Honeymoon* (1974), where the killer designs haute couture wedding gowns, in which he dresses his victims before killing them.

For a concise discussion of the relay between fetishization and the fashion industry that refers to but does not rely exclusively on a psychoanalytic model to explain the fetish, see Jean-François Fourny, “Fashion, Bodies, and Objects,” *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature* 20.2 (Summer 1996): 393–404. See also Diana Fuss, “Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look,” *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (Summer 1992): 713–37; and Molly Rothenberg and Joseph Valente’s response to Fuss, “Fashionable Theory and Fashion-Able Women: Returning Fuss’s Homospectatorial Look,” *Critical Inquiry* 22.2 (Winter 1996): 378–82.

46. British psychiatrist Robert Brittain observed, in “The Sadistic Murderer,” for *Medicine, Science, and the Law*, that part of the psychosexual composition of the serial killer includes “obsessive interest in forms of photography, representation, and ‘mirroring’ in general.” Cited in Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, pp. 130 and 151, n. 22.

- Reading Dennis Cooper's 1991 novel *Frisk*, Seltzer observes the primary role of the visual witness of photographic evidence of pornographic violence in serial murder: "Maybe if I hadn't seen this . . . snuff. Photographs," the killer/narrator says, and then "by the time I found out they were posed photographs, it was too late. I already wanted to live in a world where some boy I didn't know could be killed and his corpse could be made available to the public." Cited in Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, p. 188.
47. Can it be accidental that "mona" means, in dialect, "pussy" (a relationship Pinketts elsewhere ironizes), and that synecdoche and segmentation take place as well on another level entirely? The linkage of the words "disciplinary apparatus" to fashion is Vincent Leitch's. See his "Costly Compensations: Postmodern Fashion, Politics, Identity," *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.1 (Spring 1996): 111–28
48. Alessandri, *La leggenda del Vampa*, pp. 30–31.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Mother of All Horror: Witches, Gender, and the Films of Dario Argento*

JACQUELINE REICH



As one of the premiere (and self-proclaimed) “masters of horror,” Dario Argento continues to shock spectators with his brutal images of violence against women. The son of a film producer, Argento began his career working as an assistant on the films of Mario Bava, the grandfather of Italian horror, and later as a screenwriter on such films as Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969). In 1970 he made his directorial debut with *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, the first in a trilogy of horror mysteries profoundly influenced by Hitchcock and the Italian *giallo* (detective and mystery) tradition. Some of his more notable films include *Deep Red* (1975), about a musician who tries to solve a series of murders; *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980), based on the gothic memoirist Thomas de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and his follow-up essay, “*Suspiria de Profundis*”; and *Opera* (1987), in which the killer forces a rising female opera star to watch as he commits a series of gruesome murders. Argento’s works have recently begun to receive attention in an academic community increasingly interested in the horror film as a genre steeped in issues of sexual difference. Drawing on theories of gender and spectatorship in the classical American horror and “slasher” films, monographic studies place Argento’s work in a genre dominated by sexually ambiguous villains and monsters offering diverse points of cross-gender identification.

Argento’s use of witchcraft in *Suspiria* and the subsequent *Inferno* complicates this “gender-bending” scenario. The films, which are part of a still-incomplete trilogy, only use De Quincey’s work, in particular his three Mothers of Sorrow (*Mater Lachrymarum*, *Mater Suspiriorum*, and *Mater Tenebrarum*) as their point of departure. The provocative imagery of both *Suspiria* and *Inferno*

draws extensively on the long tradition of pagan Christian rituals, popular culture, and witchcraft in Europe in general and Italy in particular. The films feature abundant iconographic and narrative references to the witches' Sabbath, alchemy, sorcery, possessed spirits, magical potions, and supernatural events.

The discourse on witchcraft that circulates in the films limits the applicability of recent theoretical approaches to gender and the horror film precisely because of their strategic use of the phenomenon of witchcraft. Rather than embodying sexual ambiguity, the unambiguously female figure of the witch has important implications for the constructions of both the feminine and the masculine in Argento's work. In both *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, what is truly terrifying is the untamed woman, threatening the stability of patriarchal hegemony. Rather than focusing on the films' misogyny, this study aims to bring to light the way in which the texts reveal a precarious masculine subjectivity thrown into crisis on both a psychological and politico-social level by the discourse on witchcraft. Witchcraft heightens the destructive powers of the feminine so endemic to Argento's films in particular (as well as the horror genre in general) and so frightening to the unstable nature of masculinity.

The introduction of psychoanalytic and feminist film criticism into the canon of film studies has profoundly influenced the study of the horror film. One of the most influential essays remains Robin Wood's "introduction" to the American genre, published in 1979. Drawing on both Freudian and materialist theories of sexuality and culture, he sees the monster in the horror film as embodying the "repressed" in its most general sense: all that monogamous, patriarchal, bourgeois, heterosexual, capitalist society must sublimate in order to preserve its hegemony. Typically, the individual represses the undesirable in order to live peacefully as an integrated and productive member of the social order. What he or she fails to repress, society oppresses through official channels. For Wood, the real subject of horror is the repressed/oppressed's struggle for recognition, with the happy ending constituting the restoration of that repression. The monster, whose sexuality presents itself as perverted and excessive "otherness," threatens "normality."<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Steven Neale introduced the category of gender into his analysis, noting that while the human is homogenous in the horror film, the monster fractures its victims' homogeneity. Never totally human or nonhuman, the monster either exceeds masculinity or femininity or dangerously mixes them, thus disturbing the boundaries between sexual identity and difference.<sup>2</sup>

Linda Williams, drawing on these theories and others in the field of sexual difference and the cinema (e.g., Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey), sees an affinity between the monster and the female, who is, more often than not, its victim. The monster functions as a "double" or stand-in for the female, who, "when she looks" (to paraphrase the essay's title), recognizes the monster's "freakishness" as her own. In emphasizing this theory's subversive potential, Williams posits that the woman's look (and by extension her body) must be punished, for she



embodies not castration itself but rather the power to castrate, and thus must be brutally dismembered and destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

Existing academic scholarship on Argento and his films draws on these and similar paradigms of American horror. Adam Knee's article "Gender, Genre, Argento" departs from Carol Clover's work on the slasher film and gender identification. Much like the serial killers who populate films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, Argento's killers, in Knee's view, elude traditional gender categorization.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, his films feature characters who question the norms in terms of gender and sexuality: gays, lesbians, bisexuals, androgynous men and women. For Knee this constitutes a progressive refashioning of social norms and a questioning of gender constructions in the horror film, despite the fact that these films "have so much invested in the detailing of violence toward women" (p. 226).

Knee's thesis is problematic on two accounts. First, many of Argento's villains are not gender-neutral. While Knee admits that "groups of female witches do seem to have some authority over what transpires" (p. 216), he attributes the "maleficum" to a "supernatural force." As I will show, the witches have total authority over what transpires, and it is precisely in that authority that the horror lies. Second, the abundance of the bloodied, butchered female bodies, more copious than in traditional horror/slasher films, cannot be so easily dismissed. This prolific use of blood and guts, gore, and "perverse" sexuality is in fact what makes Italian horror unique (or reviled, as some critics might say).<sup>5</sup>

The Italian horror cycle (often referred to as Gothic horror) began in 1957 with Riccardo Freda's *I vampiri*, featuring a female vampire who maintains her beauty by bathing in the blood of dead virgins. Its development continues simultaneously with the British Hammer Studio *Frankenstein* films and Roger Corman's *Poe* cycle in the United States. What makes the Italian films singular are in fact their Gothic elements: the mysterious setting (castles, crypts, dark passageways), shocking visuals (specifically the use of bright colors), and a general propensity toward excess, particularly regarding sexuality. Their necrophilia, incest, torture, and sadomasochism often border on the pornographic, and for that reason many of these films have never been released in the United States or, if so, they have been heavily edited.<sup>6</sup> Argento began making films during this Gothic period (which lasted roughly until the end of the 1970s), and *Suspiria* and *Inferno* were clearly influenced by this subgenre.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, a brief tour of Web sites devoted to Argento proves that it is the butchered feminine that continues to resonate with Argento's cult following. The still images that dominate these sites, made by fans from all over the world—including Japan, Italy, France, Sweden, and the United States—prominently feature and revel in brutally mutilated female bodies. Popular magazines devoted to horror (such as *Fangoria* and *Gorezone*) also illustrate their articles with film stills featuring bloodied female faces in sadomasochistic contortions of pain and pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

Argento's own pronouncements on the subject are problematic. When asked why his victims are often beautiful women, he replied "I have them die because beauty is befitting of death. It must be a romantic concept. That's why they call me a misogynist. It's not true—I adore women. Imagine, I can't live without a female presence. Now that my wife is on vacation, I am staying in a hotel and I'm happy to have a daughter."<sup>9</sup> In other interviews, his statements reveal a deep-seated fear of the feminine. In a recent article in *La Repubblica*, taken from his "official Web site" (with the appropriately narcissistic designator of [www.darioargento.org](http://www.darioargento.org)), he was asked:

REPUBBLICA: Is there something that scares you?

ARGENTO: Women. Some I've had have really terrified me—if I think about it again, I still get chills. It's not by chance that I was never married. My daughters say that I have become a monk.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that in the first quote Argento says he is married, while in the second he alludes to his bachelor status. According to *Mondo Argento*, Argento was married to a woman named Marisa, and he is the father of two daughters, one with Marisa and the other (the actress Asia Argento) with Daria Nicolodi.<sup>11</sup> The language Argento uses to describe his anxiety is sexually-coded: it is the woman's seductive power over him (the Italian word for chill [brivido] can also mean convulsions of orgasmic pleasure) that leads him into a state of metaphorical celibacy.

While Argento's statements are insightful into his personal relationships with women, they cannot completely address the issue of gender in his films, particularly the mutilation of the female body and its implications for the representation of masculinity. In an interdisciplinary study on the representation of the male body, Peter Lehman has suggested that the fetishistic representation of the female body in the cinema intends the absence of the male body. According to Lehman, "the dominant representations of phallic masculinity in our culture depend on keeping the male body and the genitals critically out of sight."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he points out, "men under patriarchy are not just empowered by their privileging of the penis-phallus; they are also profoundly alienated from their own bodies, which are lost beneath its monstrosity" (p. 36). Thus, all that the male subject sees as monstrous in himself is projected onto the female body.

The fact that Lehman employs the term "monstrosity" in relation to masculinity encourages the applicability of his theories to the horror film's representation of the gendered body. The lack of the fetishized male body in the horror film and the proliferation of the mutilated, "abjectified" female body reveal a male subject in crisis: alien from his own body, the male projects his monstrous anxiety onto the female.<sup>13</sup> While Lehman would argue that the penis itself is the monstrous entity, I would propose that the feminine plays an essential part in that monstrosity in terms of both gender and sexuality. The masculine and the feminine are necessarily intertwined, binary oppositions that

depend on the hierarchical "othering" of one term for a coherent definition.<sup>14</sup> Thus the feminine, for the masculine, becomes the undesirable (or in this case monstrous) "other" that must be repressed in order for successful "masculinity" to be achieved. Here, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection introduces the "horror" into the tenuous distinction between the masculine (the subject) as constructed in the symbolic order and the feminine/maternal (the object). She states:

Her [the mother's] being coded as "abject" points to the considerable importance some societies attribute to women (matrilineal or related filiation, endogamy, decisive role in procreation for the survival of the social group, etc.). The symbolic "exclusionary prohibition" that, as a matter of fact, constitutes collective existence does not seem to have, in such cases, sufficient strength to dam up the demoniacal potential of the feminine. The latter, precisely on account of its power, does not succeed in differentiating itself as *other* but threatens one's *own and clean self*, which is the underpinning of any organization constituted by exclusions and hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>

The cinematically codified excesses of Argento's films (blood, organs, guts, and so on) are inextricably linked to the female body, projections of the subject's unsutured formation that threaten to ooze out of the precarious construction of the symbolic order. Wood's theory of the horror film as the return of the repressed advances the psychoanalytic notion of projection and abjection to a sociopolitical plane. The unstable nature of bourgeois patriarchy (and the precarious primacy of male subjectivity) both depends and is written on the fetishized female body of the monster's prey.

Moreover, the projection of male anxiety does not just involve the representation of female victims. In the case of *Suspiria* and *Inferno* it also embraces the figure of the witch. While Robin Briggs has pointed out that in some areas of Europe almost one-quarter of the witches tried were men, the cultural, social, and psychological contexts of European witchcraft gendered the phenomenon feminine. The gendering of space in terms of outside (masculine) and inside (feminine) as well as the role that rumor, gossip, and community played in those circumstances reveal a process through which a discourse on witchcraft came to be constructed as female specific. For Briggs, the figure of the witch is an "incarnation of the 'other,' a human being who has betrayed his or her natural allegiance to become an agent of evil."<sup>16</sup> In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, once the witch was identified as that agent of evil, the many inexplicable social, political, and economic turmoils of the era (wars, famine, plague) were often blamed on her demonic powers. On a more personal level, witches were believed to cause the "deepest traumatic fears of mankind": sudden illness or death, sexual impotence, frigidity, and barrenness.<sup>17</sup> Like Williams's monster, the witch's subversive potential rests in the power to mutilate the vulnerable male physically, emotionally, or sexually. Moreover, in *Suspiria* and *Inferno* that power is not gender-ambiguous but exclusively feminine because

of its association with witchcraft. The triumph of the symbolic order is thus predicated upon the witch's destruction and demise.

Often cited as Argento's masterpiece, *Suspiria* chronicles the adventures of Suzy Banyon, an American dance student who journeys to Freiburg, Germany, in order to study at the famous Tanakademie. Upon her arrival, she sees a young woman fleeing the academy, immediately after shouting a cryptic message to someone inside. Unable to gain entrance to the school, Suzy stays in town that night and returns to the academy the next morning, only to find that the student she had seen has been brutally murdered (the spectator has been privy to this violent scene). Suzy soon realizes that something is not right at the academy. As she begins to investigate, she is suddenly stricken with a violent illness; the local doctor prescribes bed rest, bland food, and a glass of red wine with each meal, "to build up her immune system." She befriends Sara, another dancer, who also has suspicions about the goings-on at the academy. Soon after a blind piano player is murdered by his dog (who had attacked the nephew of the assistant director, Madame Blanc), Sara is herself chased and killed, her throat slit from one end to the next, yet not before she reveals to Suzy her suspicions of witchcraft at the academy. Suzy consults Sara's family friend Franco (a psychiatrist), from whom she learns the academy's history: founded in 1895 by Helena Markos, a mysterious and rebellious Greek immigrant, the school was initially devoted to the study of both dance and the occult sciences; when Markos died in a fire in 1905, her favorite pupil took over the running of the school but abandoned the study of witchcraft. When Suzy returns to the school after talking with Franco, she finds it deserted. Tracing the footsteps she has consistently heard at night, she discovers the witches' lair, where Madame Blanc and the dance instructor, Miss Tanner, are enacting the Sabbath. The women attempt to cast their spell on Suzy, but she runs into another room, where she encounters the zombie-like body of Helena Markos, who causes Sara to rise from the dead and attempt to kill Suzy. However, Suzy manages to kill Helena and escape from the academy just as the building bursts into flames.

The literary source for *Suspiria* and the subsequent *Inferno* is, as I stated above, De Quincey's essay, "Suspiria de Profundis," intended as a continuation to his autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. This literary "sequel" further explores the world of dreams characteristic of his tales of opium addiction. The narrator dreams of Levana, the Roman goddess who, according to De Quincey, "performed for the newborn infant the earliest office of ennobling kindness," that is, raising it aloft in salute to the heavens. But for De Quincey she also "dotes upon grief," specifically the grief of innocent children forced to conform to social expectations (the example he gives, one similar to his own experience, is that of a young boy sent to Eton who literally dies of grief). Levana "communes with the powers that shake man's heart": the Sorrows, the Graces, the Muses and the Furies. Thus, the Sorrows to which De Quincey refers (the Mothers of Tears, Sighs, and Darkness) would naturally take



The wide-eyed innocence of Jessica Harper (Suzy Banyon) in Dario Argento's *Suspiria*. Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

a female, maternal form, one that is both protective and threatening in his drug-induced dream state.<sup>18</sup> The film's dream-like atmosphere and the threatening supernatural presence (here the Mater Suspiriorum, literally incarnated in the loud sighs of Helena Markos) owe much to De Quincey's creation.

There are other significant elements of the Romantic and the gothic in *Suspiria*: the dance school's location in the middle of a dark forest; the presentation of two worlds—the diurnal (the external, cultural, institutional, and familiar world) versus the nocturnal (the internal, primitive, intuitive, and unknown world, which dominates the diegesis); and finally the supernatural

sphere of dreams, sorcery, magic, and witchcraft.<sup>19</sup> Other influences Argento cites in various interviews are Grimms's fairy tales, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (in particular its magical setting), and *Alice In Wonderland*, specifically the innocent female character (Argento chose Jessica Harper, the actress who plays Suzy Banyon, for her wide-eyed expressiveness). Visual models include Jacques Tournier's *Cat People* (1942)—which inspired *Suspiria*'s eerie pool sequence—the German expressionist sets of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919), and the artwork of M. C. Escher, which Argento greatly admires (he even named the street where the Tanakademie is located "Escherstrasse"). On the iconological level, the film's color scheme, with its bright reds, yellows, and blues, further enhances the film's fantastic setting, which is similar to the Technicolor *Wizard of Oz*. The filmmakers experimented with a new film stock, no longer in use due to its cost, which captured a depth of color not possible with the normal process.<sup>20</sup>

Like the *Wizard of Oz*, *Suspiria* relies on the witch as villain, a common topos in the representation of witchcraft in the cinema. Not surprisingly, films, and Hollywood films in particular, have typically simplified this complicated historical phenomenon. Traditional historiography of witchcraft is divided into two camps: those scholars who believe that witchcraft was an actual phenomenon practiced by women in opposition to the dominant ideological structures in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and those who maintain that it was a construction designed to suppress difference and preserve the hegemonic status quo. For the purposes of this study, I will adopt the position of Jeffrey Burton Russell, who combines both approaches: he affirms that witchcraft was a "composite phenomenon drawing on folklore, sorcery, demonology, heresy and Christian theology" but was nevertheless "formed and defined by the Christian society within which it operated."<sup>21</sup>

Classical narrative cinema established early on, and then continued to mine, a simplistic cinematic body of witch signs, codes, and conventions: brooms, black cats, long dark hair, pale skin, and long fingernails, among others.<sup>22</sup> *Suspiria*'s screenplay, cowritten by Argento with Daria Nicolodi, departs from many of these traditional indices and roots itself in the immediate past. It was based on a real incident that happened to Nicolodi's grandmother: at 15 she began to study piano at an academy where she discovered the women were practicing black magic.<sup>23</sup> In the story's transition to screen, the shift from music to dance is notable: witches supposedly danced and copulated with the devil during the celebration of their Sabbath. The dance school is also cinematically self-referential: as I have argued elsewhere, the girls' school is often a locus of female solidarity and patriarchal subversion.<sup>24</sup> In a subtle intertextual reference, Alida Valli, the star and opposition ringleader of many schoolgirl comedies of the 1940s, plays the dance instructor Miss Tanner, subsequently revealed to be one of the witches.<sup>25</sup>

The film is also infused with elements from the fairy tale, sorcery, and other horror myths. Grotesque characters of the fairy tale abound, such as the

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deformed Romanian butler and the perniciously ugly female servants. Several elements of the vampire myth permeate the visuals (including a particularly disgusting shot of a knife through a beating heart). Modern “new age” magic even makes an appearance: a crystal-like object reflects a light that induces Suzy’s mild brain hemorrhage. And while she is ill, the red wine she must drink turns out not to be wine at all; instead it has the consistency of blood, perhaps menstrual blood. Popular folklore spread the notion that in order to attract a man, women would often poison wine with menstrual blood and use it as a love potion.<sup>26</sup> Although the effect in *Suspiria* is the opposite (the ultimate goal is death rather than love), the association with women, blood, and potions reflects popular mythologies surrounding women’s ability to bind others (and in this case not just men) through supernatural means.

*Suspiria* locates the threat to the masculine order specifically in its discourse on witchcraft. The mouthpiece of the symbolic, the psychiatrist to whom Suzy turns for advice, even seems to classify witchcraft as a disease along the lines of female hysteria, attributing the “current spread” of belief in magic and the occult to mental illness. It is important that Suzy’s interview with the psychiatrist is the only sequence in the entire film shot in a naturalistic way (the on-location set, use of natural lighting, the public space, and the realistic *mise-en-scène*). Consistent with Gothic representation, the film iconographically codifies the diurnal world as symbolizing truth, reality, and reason. Furthermore, it genders that world masculine, setting up the binary opposition to the dangerous, feminine, nocturnal world.

The scene of the witches’ Sabbath and administration of the Eucharist provides a perfect example of how the various cinematic, cultural, and historical discourses intermingle to produce the desired effect: the vilification of the witch, onto whom is projected male anxiety about female sexuality, and subsequently the restoration of patriarchal order. The walls of the labyrinthine passageway that Suzy follows to the witches’ lair are lined with Caligari-esque imagery, denoting a sense of mystery and instability. Upon entry, Suzy witnesses the witches’ appropriation of Christian rituals. Preparing to get rid of “that bitch of an American girl,” Miss Tanner administers the wafer and the wine to Madame Blanc. Here transubstantiation implies communion with some sort of supernatural being (in this case the head witch Helena Markos), rather than the body and blood of Christ. Blood plays a significant role in many descriptions of European witchcraft, particularly in the diabolical pact: the conferring of the woman’s blood to Satan was, in some cases, integral to the witch’s initiation. The fact that *Suspiria* situates this communion in an entirely feminized space codifies the transaction as both an inversion of Christian rituals and patriarchal order and a manifestation of female solidarity and power.<sup>27</sup>

When Madame Blanc’s body becomes possessed by the malefic force she invokes as she casts her spell on Suzy, the young woman turns to escape and discovers Sara’s mutilated body. The camera fetishistically embraces the corpse, tilting down from Suzy’s horrified face and panning slowly over the dead Sara

(the shot lasts close to half a minute). Sara's face is covered with bloodied scratch marks, pins penetrate her eyeballs, blood splatters her dress, and stakes pierce her wrists. Like the female heroines of many horror films, she was punished because, to paraphrase Williams, she "looks" (she was the first to attempt to discover the witches' lair). Her shift in the narrative from subject to object of the gaze justifies her punishment, and the camera relishes it.

After Helena Markos raises Sara's body from the dead to kill Suzy, Suzy in turn kills Helena by driving a stake through her neck (in homage to the vampire myth). Suzy knows from her earlier conversation with Dr. Wilnius, an expert in witchcraft, that the only way to destroy the witches' power is to kill the head witch (a concept that derives more from the archetypal villain of folklore and the oral tradition than any historically verifiable witch lore). More than just the leader of the pack, Helena Markos is the supreme image of the maternal abject: wrinkled, distorted, and riddled with open, festering wounds. Her death constitutes the demise of the witches' power and the restitution of the symbolic order.

Witchcraft resurfaces in Argento's next film, *Inferno*, with its power further enhanced through the practice of alchemy. Rose Elliot, a young poet living in New York, purchases a book—written by an architect and alchemist named Varelli and entitled *The Three Mothers*—from a crippled antique dealer whose name is Kazanian. The film begins with a voice-over reading from the book, which is loosely based on the De Quincey essay. Varelli himself tells of his encounter with the three spirits and how he built each of them a house: Mater Suspiriorum in Freiburg (the setting of *Suspria*), Mater Tenebrarum in New York, and Mater Lachrymarum in Rome, from which together they rule the world with pain, tears, and darkness. Varelli states that there are three keys to opening their secret: the source of the odor that emanates from their buildings, the image of each of the mothers that is hidden in their cellars, and, in a mysteriously ambiguous phrase, "under the soles of your shoes." The narrative is driven by the fact that anyone who reads the book or discovers the existence of the mothers is killed.

Varelli's second clue obsesses Rose, as she descends into the basement of the Gothically menacing apartment building in which she lives. There she discovers a flooded room with a painting of Mater Tenebrarum (Argento in fact chose the actress who plays Rose, Irene Miracle, for her underwater acting abilities). A decomposed corpse frightens Rose away and tries to impede her escape. After this encounter, she writes to her brother Mark, who is studying musicology in Rome. Reading the letter during a lesson on Verdi's "Va' pensiero," he begins to see erotically charged visions of a beautiful feline-like woman who mouths inaudible words to him. (Cats abound in the film and are usually associated with the feminine: they populate Mater Tenebrarum's building in New York, invade Kazanian's home, and even prepare victims for their impending death. Witches have long been associated with cats, both in





The destruction of the witches' lair in *Suspiria*. Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

history and popular culture. Their connotation is usually malevolent, with the witch often possessing the cat with her spirit in order to spread evil.<sup>28)</sup>

When Mark leaves class to chase after the young woman, who appears both real and imaginary, he leaves Rose's letter behind. His friend Sara discovers the letter and, intrigued by its description of the three mothers, goes to the Biblioteca Filosofica and steals a copy of the book. She gets lost as she tries to exit the building, stumbling on a room filled with boiling cauldrons and a mysterious male figure in the corner. As the alchemist (we never see his face) turns around to retrieve the copy of *The Three Mothers*, he removes a dark glove

and reveals a distorted hand: ghostly white, wrinkled, with arthritic fingers and extraordinarily long fingernails. This hand returns to kill several times, gloved and naked. While Knee has interpreted this hand as a gender-neutral symbol, its status as a cinematic code and referent to witchcraft, much like the presence of the feline element in the film, is unmistakable (one needs only to think of the witch's distorted extremities in *The Wizard of Oz*). The fact that the hand is often gloved in black reinforces much of *Suspiria*'s discourse on the witch: the powers of the feminine are all the more pernicious because they are hidden from sight.

The other supernatural referent here is alchemy, which was one of a range of magical practices circulating during the early modern era. Regarded by scholars as a more scientific brand of magic, its premise was that it was possible to change humankind's "spiritual nature" by altering chemical compositions. According to Russell, the relationship between alchemy and witchcraft shifted during the course of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, initially being somewhat distinct but later being invoked in witch trials. He cites the case of Gilles de Rais in 1440, who was accused of using alchemy and magic to summon demons and of making a pact with the devil.<sup>29</sup> For Argento in *Inferno*, however, there exists little distinction between alchemy and witchcraft: both are malevolent forces of death, with the alchemist in service to the Mothers (he, like the others, tries to recover all copies of his opus).

After Sara flees from the alchemist, she and her companion Carlo are brutally stabbed in her apartment, to the accompanying strains of "Va' pensiero." On the same night, a makeshift guillotine, operated by the very hand that attacked Sara, decapitates Rose as she, like Suzy of *Suspiria*, makes her way through the labyrinth-like maze of Mater Tenebrarum's multihued lair. Mark discovers Sara's body as well as the fragments of Rose's letter, and he travels to New York in search of his sister. After he and Elise, Suzy's wealthy neighbor, discover fresh blood on the carpet, Mark follows the trail by himself but is then overcome, in another *Suspirian* echo, by violent body convulsions. While searching for Mark, Elise is fatally attacked by a group of cats—who scratch, claw, and bite her face—and then by the black gloved hand. The killings continue, with the victims including Carol, Elise's butler, and Kazanian.

Mark finally uncovers the truth when he understands the meaning of Varelli's third clue. Dismantling one of the floorboards in Rose's room, he discovers another of the film's many underground passageways (revealed mostly through point-of-view shots). This one leads to none other than Varelli himself, now a vocally-impaired invalid imprisoned as a servant to Mater Tenebrarum. The music accompanying this journey of discovery is a *Carmina Burana*-like chant in Latin evoking the three Mothers. Throughout the film, sound is extremely significant in creating mood. Whereas in *Suspiria* Argento's use of color intends to evoke a supernatural world, in *Inferno* he plays with actual, commentative, parallel, and counterpoint sound, ranging from whispers seemingly emanating from walls to the incessant meowing of the cats, from the

dual functionality of Verdi's aria (as accompaniment to sexual fantasy as well as death) to the electronic score composed by Keith Emerson of Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. Mark finally encounters the Mother of Darkness, who masqueraded in the diurnal world as Varelli's nurse. When the somewhat obtuse Mark does not understand who she is, she spells it out for him: she, like her sisters, is death, and she attempts to include Mark among her many victims. However, like *Suspiria's* Suzy, Mark is able to escape from the Mother as the building goes up in flames.

*Suspiria's* dream-like world has become *Inferno's* nightmare of Hell, but it is still dominated by a menacing female power bent on destruction. Unlike many horror films, here the witches are not under the control of a male entity, be it the devil himself or a demon. Rather than deriving from some outside force (e.g., intercourse with the devil), the witches' ultimate power is autonomous, deriving from the Mater Suspiriorum (Helena Markos) and the Mater Tenebrarum. Moreover, female autonomy provides the true occasion for horror. Barbara Creed, in her study on the feminine and horror, emphasizes the sexual difference of the "monstrous feminine" and its connection to motherhood and the maternal. The witch, historically perceived (according to Briggs) as the bad mother, hostile to nurture and fertility,<sup>30</sup> for Creed represents the abject, "monstrous feminine," an enemy of the symbolic, patriarchal order who threatens castration at every turn. The monster in the horror film straddles the border between the maternal/semiotic and the paternal/symbolic. Symbolized by the corpses, bodily fluids, and bodily waste that populate the genre, the abject's (and the monster's) function is to "bring about an encounter with the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability." The abject destabilizes traditional binary oppositions: between the human and the nonhuman, good and evil, and, in the case of both Argento films, the masculine and the feminine.<sup>31</sup>

The abject, and its relation to the monstrous feminine, is particularly relevant for *Inferno*. Even water, for instance, loses its traditional iconographic significance of purification and redemption, and assumes a dark and monstrous quality. The film's water imagery includes two Gothically intense rainstorms, also related to histories of witchcraft: it was believed that witches, when provoked, could create meteorological disturbances.<sup>32</sup> Other aquatic references in *Inferno* include the street location of Mater Lachrymarum's building (Via dei bagni), Mark's dream of crashing ocean waves, and Kazanian's death in a rat-filled pond in Central Park. The water is often polluted and murky, clouded by dirt in the underwater room, thunder and lightning during the storms, and sewage in the park.<sup>33</sup> Associated with female bodily fluids, it threatens the order of the male symbolic. Water is thus another agent (like the cats and alchemy) through which the menacing power of the feminine manifests itself.

In the conclusions of both *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, the witches' lairs are burned, producing a giant conflagration in which the witches and all they stand for disintegrate, leaving no legacy of female subversion and quelling all threats to

the masculine order. In these films, I see no critique of gender constructions (as Knee does) or subversive potential (as do Williams and Clover) in Argento's problematic representations of the female body. In *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, the witch serves as the historically appropriate repository for the projection of patriarchal instability and tendentious masculinity.<sup>34</sup> The literary and cinematic paradigms of the Gothic narrative (with its hidden, mad women), the horror film's return of repressed female sexuality in the "monstrous feminine," and the demonization of the feminine reveal the psychosocial and sexual anxieties that underlie masculinity in crisis. On a personal level, I read these films as echoing Argento's self-proclaimed fears of the feminine. On a more theoretical level, their problematically excessive representations of the female body reflect the need to keep the male body hidden and repress its own monstrosity. The abject marks the space in which the repression of the feminine reveals itself.

*Suspiria* and *Inferno*, however, problematize one aspect of the "monstrous feminine" and Kristeva's theories of the abject: their relation to the castration complex. In both films, the majority of the witches' murder victims are already "castrated"; they are either women or, like the blind piano player and the crippled Kazanian, gendered feminine in terms of cinema's traditional signifying practices. The discourse on witchcraft is thus doubly coded. On the one hand, it implies the dangers of female autonomy and independence from patriarchy (in which rests their ultimate power). On the other hand, it intends that female power unleashed will eventually turn on itself and self-destruct.

Like De Quincey's *Levana* and the three Mothers, the witches are at one with "the powers that shake man's heart." Their role as maternal protector is only a façade: they remain a hidden threat to the stability of patriarchal hegemony. The witch functions as stand-in for the subversive potential of female sexuality and solidarity. She constitutes a threat to the entire hierarchical structure of gender subjectivity, and thus she must be mutilated and destroyed. The conclusions of *Suspiria* and *Inferno* leave no trace of her menace, maintaining the hegemonic status quo and restoring the female to her rightful place as object rather than subject in the symbolic order.

## Notes

I would like to thank Krin Gabbard, Margaret Gallucci, Keala Jewell, and Ellen Nerenberg for their insightful comments and invaluable help with this essay.

1. Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 164–200.
2. Steven Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), pp. 61–62.
3. As represented in the film itself, this look can only be constructed as masochistic; the inevitable scream signals that recognition. Linda Williams, "When the Woman

- Looks," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 15–34.
4. Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Adam Knee, "Gender, Genre, Argento," in Grant, ed., *The Dread of Difference*, pp. 213–30.
  5. Leon Hunt, "A (Sadistic) Night at the Opera: Notes on the Italian Horror Film," *The Velvet Light Trap* 30 (Fall 1992): 65–75. Excess is an important characteristic of the horror film, be it the serial killings of the slasher films, the forbidden "perversions" of exploitation films (sexual, racial, and cannibal, for instance), and the corporeal revulsions of what Mikita Brottman has labeled "cinema vomitif." See Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films: Toward an Anthropology of Cinéma Vomitif* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 1–15.
  6. Other popular subgenres of the 1970s intended to exploit the success of more mainstream films include Nazi-oriented, sex-horror films based on Cavani's *The Night Porter*; zombie pictures drawing on George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*; apocalyptic adventures along the lines of George Miller's *Mad Max*; and possession, cannibal, and cultist films. *Images*, an on-line journal of cinema studies, featured an entire issue on the "Golden Age of Italian Horror (1957–79)," and much of my information on this subject comes from articles posted there, specifically Gary Johnson, "Italian Horror: An Introduction," and Robert Frisching, "Italian Horror in the Seventies," <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue05/infocus/>.
  7. Giorgio Bertellini, in an unpublished paper ("Local Females, Black Feuilleton, and Narrative Attractions: For a Genealogy of Argento's Terror Films"), cites important literary referents in Argento's films: the *romanzo d'appendice*, the serialized novel popular during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the above-mentioned *giallo*. Similarly, much of Argento's work, in particular *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, draws on the Gothic tradition in Italian literature, embodied, as David Del Principe has shown, in the nineteenth-century aesthetics of *scapigliatura*. See David Del Principe, *Rebellion, Death and Aesthetics in Italy: The Demons of Scapigliatura* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).
  8. Some of the Web sites include: a Swedish site, "Magasindefekthalloffame" ([http://www.defekt.com/hallfame/dario\\_argento.html](http://www.defekt.com/hallfame/dario_argento.html)); a Norwegian homepage, "Norhawk's Dario Argento Page" (<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/9262/>); a French homepage, "Dario Argento: Le maitre de l'Horreur," <http://www3.sympatico.ca/forlorn/>; and a Japanese homepage, "Avete visto Dario Argento page" (<http://www.skyblue.ne.jp/yazawa/dario.html>). The most comprehensive Web site, with a complete and updated list of links, is "A Fistful of Dario: The Dark Cinema of Dario Argento" (<http://www.en.com/users/tmr/argento.html>).
  9. "Le faccio morire perché la morte si addice alla bellezza. Sarà un concetto romantico. Per questo dicono che sono misogino. No, io adoro le donne. Pensa, non posso vivere senza una presenza femminile. Ora che mia moglie è in vacanza, dormo in albergo e sono felice di avere una figlia." As cited in Luigi Cozzi, *Il cinema dei mostri. Da Godzilla a Dario Argento* (Rome: Fannucci, 1991), p. 268. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
  10. "REPUBBLICA: C'è qualcosa che le fa paura? ARGENTO: Le donne. Alcune di quelle che ho avuto mi hanno fatto davvero paura, se ci ripenso sento ancora i brividi. Non è un caso che non mi sono mai sposato, le mie figlie dicono che sono diventato

- un monaco." Maria Pia Fusco, "Il mio orrore è politico," *La Repubblica*, March 22, 1998, downloaded from <http://www.darioargento.org>.
11. *Mondo Argento* (London: Midnight Media, 1996).
  12. Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 28.
  13. Laplanche and Pontalis define the defense mechanism of projection as the "operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes or even objects, which the subject refuses to recognise or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person." Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 349–56.
  14. For a definition of masculine, feminine, and gender, I defer to Joan Wallach Scott's important essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 28–50. For Scott, gender is a term that refers to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes based on common perceptions of sexual difference, which rely on the hierarchical superiority of men over women. Scott outlines four different means by which gender is configured: 1) through cultural symbols that can be contradictory; 2) through the regulation of the interpretation of these very symbols; 3) through discourses produced by various political, social, and cultural institutions; and 4) through the construction of individual subjectivity.
  15. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 64–65.
  16. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Penguin, 1996), pp. 3 and 259–86.
  17. *Witchcraft in Europe, 1100–1700: A Documentary History*, eds. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 20.
  18. Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Together with Their Sequels, The English Mail-Coach and Suspiria de Profundis* (New York: Dial Press, 1928), pp. 270–79.
  19. Charlotte Bunnell, "The Gothic: A Literary Genre's Transition to Film," in Grant, ed., *Planks of Reason*, pp. 79–100.
  20. Fabio Maiello, *Intervista a Dario Argento. L'occhio che uccide* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1996), pp. 37–42.
  21. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1972). See also Robin Briggs, "Many Reasons Why: Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanation," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, eds. John Barry et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 49–63.
  22. For a history of the witch in the horror film, see Sharon Russell, "The Witch in Film: Myth and Reality," in Grant, ed., *Planks of Reason*, pp. 113–25.
  23. There was a struggle between Argento and Nicolodi over the authorship of *Suspiria*. Nicolodi claimed that she wrote the majority of the screenplay, while Argento maintains that the credit belongs to him. Nicolodi did not know if her name would even appear in the credits until a few days before the film's release (it did). She also claims that *Inferno* was her idea as well. See the interview with Nicolodi in Luca M. Palmerini and Gaetano Mistretta, *Spaghetti Nightmares: Italian Fantasy-Horror as Seen Through the Eyes of Their Protagonists* (Key West, Fla.: Fantasma Books, 1996), pp. 112–18.

24. Jacqueline Reich, "Reading, Writing and Rebellion: Collectivity, Specularity, and Sexuality in the Italian Schoolgirl Comedy, 1934–1943," in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 220–51.
25. Argento states that he chose Valli for the role after seeing her on stage and that he had always admired her as an actress. Maiello, *Intervista a Dario Argento*, p. 41.
26. Carlo Levi's anthropological novel *Christ Stopped at Eboli* articulates this conviction through the words of the town's Dr. Milillo, as he describes a threat posed by Eboli's female population: "Good people, but primitive. Especially watch out for the women. You are a young man, a good-looking young man. Don't accept anything from a woman: no wine, no coffee, nothing to eat or drink. They have without a doubt added a love-potion. . . . Do you want to know what they make them out of?"—And the doctor leaned down to my ear, stammering in a low voice, happy to have finally remembered an exact scientific name—"Blood, you know, men-stru-al blood—Be careful." (Buona gente, ma primitiva. Si guardi soprattutto dalle donne. Lei è un giovanotto, un bel giovanotto. Non accetti nulla da una donna. Nè vino, nè caffè, nulla da bere o da mangiare. Certamente ci metterebbero un filtro. . . . Vuol sapere di che cosa li fanno?—E il dottore mi si china all'orecchio, balbettando a bassa voce, felice di aver ricordato finalmente un termine scientifico esatto.—Sangue, sa, ca-ta-meniale. . . . Stia attento.) Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), p. 13. The novel was originally published in 1945.
27. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, pp. 25–38.
28. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, p. 30.
29. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, pp. 7–10, 262–63.
30. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, pp. 282–86.
31. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 11–14. In her history of witches in film, Sharon Russell notes that because witches are believed to have the power to cause impotence, they are the ultimate expression of castration anxiety; Russell, "The Witch in Film," pp. 113–25.
32. Briggs calls attention to the popular belief that witches in Scotland and Denmark were responsible for the violent storms that marked King James VI's voyage home after his marriage to Anne in 1590. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, p. 54.
33. Maitland McDonagh takes a Jungian approach to the significance of this aqueous imagery, associating it with the archetypal Great Mother, who personifies both the nurturing and threatening aspects of the feminine. Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), pp. 150–51.
34. My reading corresponds in many ways to Christopher Sharrett's analysis of the modern horror film as embodying a reactionary ideology, particularly in the notion that the horror "is rooted in that which transgresses sexuality under patriarchy." "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture," in Grant, ed., *Dread of Difference*, pp. 253–76, here p. 268.





PART TWO

*Monsters and  
Conception*



## CHAPTER 5

### *Dante's "dolce serena" and the Monstrosity of the Female Body*

NAOMI YAVNEH



For love often makes a man think that a base and ugly woman is noble and beautiful and makes him class her above all other women in nobility and beauty.

Amor enim personam saepe degenerem et deformem tanquam nobilem et formosam repraesentat amanti et facit, eam plus quam omnes alias nobilem atque pulcherrimam deputari.

Andreas Capellanus, *De amore* I.6, cited in *Divina Commedia*

The *Divina Commedia* seems a fitting text for a consideration of monsters and monstrosity in the Italian tradition.<sup>1</sup> Dante's *Inferno*, the most widely- as well as easily-read of the three *cantiche*, is full of strikingly depicted malevolent creatures whose vivid representations remain among the most memorable in the poem. Whether physically horrifying, like Geryon, Manto, or the "malebranche," or spiritually grotesque like Ugolino, the monstrous denizens of the *Inferno* have captured the imaginations of poets and critics, leaving behind a paper and now cyber-trail of readings and interpretations second only perhaps to that which follows the Bible.

My focus is not on a monster from Hell per se, although she seems to belong there (which, as we shall see, is part of my point). Nor has her significance as allegorical figure (aside from the source of her "siren-ness") been hotly debated; indeed, her presence has often been treated as something of an embarrassment by professors of Dante studies anxious to avoid discussions of medieval misogyny and gender issues in general. But why *do* we have an infernal resident showing up in Purgatory? And what are the larger hermeneutic implications of a seemingly banal trope rehearsed by perhaps the greatest allegorical poet of all times? These are the questions I hope to answer in my consideration of the monstrosity of Dante's "dolce serena."

At the beginning of *Purgatorio* XIX, as he lies asleep on the terrace of “accidia,” sloth, Dante experiences the second of three prophetic dreams that help prepare him for the Earthly Paradise. Here an incoherent, old, and deformed woman is transformed by the pilgrim’s gaze into a beautiful siren whose destructive song is irresistible. A holy lady appears and calls to Virgilio,<sup>2</sup> who, never turning his own eyes from the “*donna santa*,” lays bare the stinking belly of the seductive “*femmina*.” Yet the pilgrim is awakened not by the sight of the Siren’s “*ventre*,” but its *stench*, the “*puzzo che n’uscita*” that represents the shock of physicality in a canticle increasingly concerned with the “vanitate” of the flesh and its allures.<sup>3</sup>

The pilgrim remains troubled and distracted by his “*novella vision*” until his guide provides a gloss:

“Vedesti,” disse, “quell’antica strega  
che sola sovr’a noi omai si piagne;  
vedesti come l’uom da lei si slega.  
Bastiti, e batti a terra le calcagne.  
li occhi rivolgi al logor che gira  
lo rege eterno con le rote magne.”  
(*Purg.* XIX.58–63)

(“You have seen,” he said, “that ancient witch who alone is now wept for above us: you have seen how man frees himself from her. Let it suffice you, and strike your heels on the ground: turn your eyes to the lure which the eternal King spins with the mighty spheres.”)

Virgilio’s explanation seems both straightforward and apt; the vision of the “*strega*” is directly relevant to the pilgrim’s particular situation at this point in both the journey and the poem, when Dante is about to explore the three sins of incontinence: avarice, gluttony, and, perhaps most significantly, concupiscence. Indeed, this dream is traditionally interpreted as prophetic of the venial sins about to be purged, and the transient, illusory pleasures derived therefrom.<sup>4</sup>

The (misogynist) allegory of seemingly beautiful woman revealed as ugly seems depressingly familiar, and easily explained. But the commentary tradition tends to ignore the gendered implications of the Siren’s foul “*ventre*”: why is her *belly* bared and why does it stink? As I shall argue, the Siren’s foul belly makes her a figure not only for the sins of incontinence, but more specifically for the threat of a female sexuality shown to be regressive, monstrous, and even infernal. The crux of the vision is the interpretive dilemma posed by female appearance: If a woman’s beauty can lead to salvation, the dream suggests the menace of a desire that refuses to look beyond the corporeal; tainted by Eve’s sin, even the most beautiful female body is as monstrous as the Siren’s belly. As the text makes clear, the Siren’s veil of beauty is the pilgrim’s confabulation, and Beatrice’s words in the Earthly Paradise confirm that the physical beauty of the mediatrix herself is illusory. By examining the way the dream looks back

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to the Inferno and forward to the Earthly Paradise, we shall see how this threat is central to the episode and to the poem as a whole.

### **The Siren's Biblical and Classical Origins: Beauty as/and Filth**

In treating this episode, critics in general seem unsurprised that Virgilio should rip off the Siren's dress, or that "vizio" should be literally embodied in the belly of a woman. The hidden monstrosity of the beautiful female has been a recurrent topos since Eve; Virgilio's classification of the Siren as "quell'antica strega" will be recalled in the Earthly Paradise, where Eve is referred to as "l'antica matre"<sup>5</sup> in a passage that explicitly figures the Fall as resulting from woman's sin:

buon zelo  
mi fè riprender l'ardimento d'Eva,  
che là dove ubidia la terra e 'l cielo,  
femmina, sola e pur teste formata,  
non sofferse di star sotto alcun velo;  
sotto 'l qual se divota fosse stata,  
avrei quelle ineffabili delizie  
sentite prima e più lunga fiata.

(*Purg.* XXIX.23–29)

(good zeal made me reprove Eve's impudence, that there where earth and heaven are obedient, a woman, alone and but then formed, did not bear to remain under any veil, under which, if she had been devout, I should have tasted those ineffable delights before, and for a longer time.)

In this scene just prior in the poem to Beatrice's "re-velation," the text stresses and personalizes this "femmina's" role as universal source of all our woe, while underscoring the paradoxical nature of that "velo" which kept the unashamed first parents from recognizing their own nakedness. The punishment for refusal to stay beneath the veil of innocence is the necessity for man and woman to create literal veils<sup>6</sup>—the fig leaves with which Adam and Eve cover themselves after eating the forbidden fruit. According to Augustine, bodily shame arises not from an abstract realization of good and evil as imparted by the Tree of Knowledge, but rather from the practical vicissitudes of postlapsarian sexuality. Original sin, in Augustine's view, is not a physical condition, but an "apostasy of the will," an idolatrous desire for autonomy. Nevertheless, the fallen state was and continues to be manifested most explicitly and visibly in the body—that is, through sexual arousal, for while the sexual organs themselves did not change, they began to behave in a different, shameful manner.<sup>7</sup> Before the Fall, Adam and Eve would have procreated (for why else would Adam's helpmeet have been created female?) but with no loss of virginity and with no passion:

"the sexual organs," Augustine explains, "could have been set in motion by the same authority of the will as the other bodily members."<sup>8</sup>

The punishment for their sin was that detailed in Genesis 3:16–19,<sup>9</sup> as well as procreation through lust, for like Dante's *contrapasso*, the tumescence of the penis was a parodic punishment for their sinful aspiration to autonomy. After Adam and Eve disobeyed,

they felt for the first time a movement of disobedience in their flesh, as punishment in kind for their own disobedience to God. . . . The soul, which had taken a perverse delight in its own liberty and disdained to serve God, was now deprived of its own original mastery over the body. . . . The sexual desire (*libido*) of our disobedient members arose in those first human beings as a result of the sin of disobedience, and because a shameless movement resisted the rule of their will, they covered their shameful members.<sup>10</sup>

Augustine's vivid explication of the irrational, uncontrollable, and animalistic nature of postlapsarian intercourse is largely concerned with issues of male rather than female arousal and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> But woman is similarly punished in the flesh, as God's words make clear: "I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband." Throughout the Bible, as throughout the subsequent patristic tradition (including Augustine himself), we find the parallel assertions of both the dangers of woman's beauty (a cause of the Fall)<sup>12</sup> and the filth that it conceals, the shameful nakedness which is our postlapsarian legacy.<sup>13</sup> In the writings of the prophets, the female body functions as metonymy for the people of Israel, who have turned from God. In a passage suggestive for our discussion of the Siren, Isaiah foretells the punishment of the idolatrous and proud beauties of Zion: "Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched-forth necks and wanton eyes, . . . the Lord will make bald the crowns of their heads and uncover their secret parts" (Isaiah 3.16–17). The punishment for pride is exposure of the "secret parts," the revelation of the true nature of such idolatrous beauty.<sup>14</sup> This dichotomy between the outer semblance of beauty and its concomitant pride, and the shame of the "secret parts," is further clarified by the prophet Ezekiel, who employs the metaphor of Israel as harlot bride of God:

Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord! . . . Because thy filthiness was poured out, and thy ignominy revealed through thy harlotries with thy lovers; and because of all the idols of thy abominations, and for the blood of thy children, that thou didst give unto them, therefore behold, I will gather all thy lovers with whom thou hast been and all them that thou hast loved, with all them that thou hast hated . . . and will uncover thy nakedness unto them, that they may see all thy nakedness. (Ezekiel 16.37)

Because the woman has shown her filth, her true nature, by playing the harlot,<sup>15</sup> the Lord will reveal to all—lovers and enemies alike—her nakedness, the true source of that filth. In the Hebrew Bible, to cover is a sign of marriage and covenant—God as husband clothes Israel's nakedness, just as in Genesis 3 he fashions garments for his errant creations, Adam and Eve.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, illicit sexuality must be exposed as a form of punishment: "a woman who does not maintain her nakedness under cover," notes biblical scholar Ilana Pardes, "exposes herself to the danger of being undressed in public."<sup>17</sup> The import, then, of such a passage is clear: beneath her proud and beautiful exterior, a woman's nakedness is shameful. Her pudenda, the "things of which one ought to be ashamed" which is the force of that Latin passive participle, are a synecdoche of woman's nature.

But women's filth is not merely metaphoric; if, as in Augustine's view, the autonomous penis is the physical sign of men's disobedience, the postlapsarian female body—the genitals, the uterus and its products—are the sign of woman's fallen nature and her sin. Indeed, her body is perceived as aberrant, grotesque, against the male norm. Corresponding to the theological view that woman is man's subordinate,<sup>18</sup> medieval medical authority held to the doctrine of both Aristotle and Galen that woman is a defective male; deprived, passive, and material, she seeks completion through intercourse with the male. Woman, created according to the general tendency of Nature to satisfy the need for procreation, is not a monstrous creation, but her uterus—described in Plato's *Timaeus* as "an animal desirous of generating"<sup>19</sup> (with its etymological concomitant, hysteria) that creates inordinate desire for intercourse (*furor uterinus*) and even women's excessive garrulity—is. Similarly, this errant organ weakens rationality, increasing the incidence and violence of passions in women: hate, vengeance, fear, anger, compassion, pity, love.

The particular filth and foulness of woman is associated with the products of her uterus, the physical evidence of Eve's sin: childbirth and the menstrual flow. According to the author of *De secretis mulierum*, an important gynecological sourcebook in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, "the womb of a female is like a sewer, situated in the middle of a town where all the waste materials run together and are sent forth";<sup>20</sup> the menstrual flow is undigested food, retained in the pregnant woman to provide food for the fetus. If the nongestating woman should retain the menses, the resulting abundance of evil humors are extremely dangerous to those who come in contact with her. Michael Scot's treatise on the *Secrets of Nature*, following Isidore of Seville, maintains that contact with the menstrual flow can cause leprosy in men, rabies in dogs, and dessication in plants. Most significantly for our discussion, Scot urges that the purging of the woman after childbirth be hidden from men and children lest they be horrified by the sight of this blood: if men knew what filth women produce they would no longer want to touch them, and thus the human race would soon come to an end.<sup>21</sup>

The evil of women's bodies and the menace they pose is a patristic

commonplace that finds expression in Dante's poem as well. Yet the "serena" is neither an Old Testament harlot, consistently a figure for the Church in patristic exegesis, nor the whore of Babylon evident in the "puttana" who stands for the papacy in the pageant that concludes the *Purgatorio*. Clearly, the "femmina balba" is monstrous, but why is she a siren?

The poet's authority (if he has one) for Ulysses' encounter with a siren has been hotly contested by *dantisti*: Dante, of course, had not read Homer, and that Ulysses was held by the sirens is, like much of the voyage recounted in *Inferno* XXVI, the poet's own creation.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the source for the encounter with Ulysses (if the poet has presented his Siren as lying, she is that much more threatening), the moral threat of the sirens was a medieval commonplace.<sup>23</sup> If Dante didn't know Homer, he certainly was familiar with Isidore of Seville, whose description rearticulates and perpetuates the earlier encyclopedic tradition:

[the ancient poets] contrived [fingunt] that the three sirens were part woman, part bird, having wings and talons; one of them made music with her voice, another with the pipes, a third with the lyre. They led sailors, seduced by their song, to shipwreck. In truth they were actually prostitutes who, since they led passersby to poverty, are portrayed as causing shipwrecks; as having wings and talons because love both flies and wounds. Thus they are said to dwell in the waves, since the waves gave birth to Venus.<sup>24</sup>

In a persuasive reading, Robert Hollander suggests that while the allegorical significance of Dante's "serena" can be found in Isidore's etymologies, the true source of her physical representation is not a siren but rather Virgil's harpies, whom the "femmina balba" recalls in her color (she is "scialba"; the harpies are "pallida"), her hands (the harpies' are "uncae," the Siren's "monche"—an adjective, the critic adds, used only here and in *Inferno* XIII, where Dante's "arpie" appear, although the term is not used to describe them), and finally her speech (the harpies, Hollander notes, "at least until their leader, Celaeno, offers her dispiriting augury [III.247–57] are decidedly noisy but not particularly verbal. . . . The movement in Virgil's passage, like that in Dante's, is from unclear utterance to a clear speech which is meant to deter a noble purpose, Aeneas' journey to Italy, Dante's to Beatrice").<sup>25</sup> But most significant for the comparison are the harpies' stinking bellies:<sup>26</sup>

virginei volucrum vultus, foedissima ventris  
proluevis uncaeque manus et pallida semper  
ora fame.

*Aeneid* III.216–18; my emphasis)<sup>27</sup>

(birds with the faces of virgins, their bellies drip with a most fetid discharge, and their hands are talons, and their faces pale and famished.)



The parallel with the harpies is, so to speak, attractive, particularly in the analogy between the “serena’s” exposed “ventre” and the “foedissima ventris proluvies” of Virgil’s creatures that it recalls. Yet while the allusiveness of the “ventre” is both suggestive and, I would agree, intentional, the comparison ultimately breaks down. Although the “serena’s” beauty is the pilgrim’s creation, her song literally entrances him, while the harpies are consistently repulsive; Celaeno’s speech, if prophetic, is certainly not “dolce.” Moreover, harpies appear elsewhere in Dante’s poem, in the “selve” of the suicides (*Inferno* XIII):

Quivi le brutte Arpie lor nidi fanno,  
 che cacciar de le Strofade i Troiani  
 con tristo annunzio di futuro danno.  
 Ali hanno late, e colli e visi umani,  
 pie con artigli, e pennuto 'l gran ventre;  
 fanno lamenti in su li alberi strani.  
 (*Inf.* XIII.10–15)

(Here the ugly harpies make their nests, who drove the Trojans from the Strophades with dismal announcement of future ill; They have broad wings, and human necks and faces, feet with claws, and feathered are their great bellies; they make lament on strange trees.)

The use of the word “brutte” underscores a crucial distinction between Dante’s “arpie” and their Virgilian prototypes: rather than sporting the faces of virgins, the infernal harpies are *ugly*. The literal foulness of their bodies, however, has been metaphorized, for they do not despoil the shades’ food, but rather the suicides themselves, who, in another allusion to *Aeneid* III, have been transformed into trees. Dante’s “arpie,” despite the composite, monstrous bodies that make them fitting indigenes of the *Inferno*, are far from Hell’s most repulsive creatures; the poet has saved their stinking belly for his Siren, to lend her the infernality which, as we shall see, is her crucial attribute.

But it is unlike Dante to repeat a figure such as the harpies.<sup>28</sup> Thus while Virgil’s harpies lend their foul bellies to the “serena,” I believe there is another Aenean moment behind the Siren, another perilous journey and another threatening female. After Aeneas departs from Sicily for Italy, prior to his arrival in Carthage<sup>29</sup> he stops in Pergamus, the “mini-Troy” created by Hector’s brother, now married to Andromache. As Aeneas prepares to leave this funereal city, symbolic of the world he must leave behind to build a new empire, he learns that in order to sail safely to Italy, he and his men must bypass the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis, the whirlpool:

But Scylla is confined to blind retreats,  
 a cavern, and her mouths thrust out to drag  
 ships toward the shoals. First she seems human:  
 down to the pubes, she seems a lovely-breasted  
 virgin; but underneath a monster,

creature from the sea, a terrifying body;  
 a wolfish belly, merging in a dolphin's tail.  
 (*Aen.* III.426–28)<sup>30</sup>

The seemingly beautiful yet monstrous Scylla, whose “mouths thrust out to drag / ships toward the shoals,” is a literal version of the “serena,” who “leads mariners astray” with her beautiful, alliterative song. The temporal juxtaposition of her two aspects (*prima* hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo / pube tenus, *postremo* immani corpore pistrix / delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum; my emphasis) is repeated by the chronology of Dante’s dream, where the beautiful Siren is revealed to have a stinking belly. Suggestively, the use of the word “utero”<sup>31</sup> rather than “venter” (“belly,” often with the suggestion of greed or hunger, but also “womb”) here emphasizes the specifically female danger of this monstrous creature: the threat of female sexuality, of the physicality that is so graphically—and misogynistically—central to the pilgrim’s vision, and which in Virgil’s poem connects both the harpies and Scylla to the queen to whom they are described. Dido’s true monstrosity, that dual nature which first appears enticingly attractive but is shown after to be hideously destructive, is deflected and literalized in the description of the harpies and Scylla (beautiful faces/disgusting bellies) which the hero himself narrates to her.

Aeneas relates both his conflict with the harpies and the description of Scylla to Dido as part of the retrospective tale of his journey, which the Carthaginian queen will ask him to repeat over and over.<sup>32</sup> The narrative device, which imitates Odysseus’ travelogue during his stay with Alcinoos during this “Odyssean half” of the *Aeneid*, serves likewise to underscore the dangers of the encounter with Dido: Aeneas looks backward rather than forward, placing his private pleasure above his “fatum,” his destiny.<sup>33</sup> In the Carthage episode, stasis is linked to female sexuality; as the description of Aeneas draped in purple (IV.261–64) illustrates, uxoriousness leads to contamination. The emasculated Aeneas is physically no longer the hero. But once he has determined to leave her, the dangers of Dido’s sexuality are projected back onto the queen herself, who, in the comparison to a Bacchante, is revealed as monstrous in her hysteria:

Her mind is helpless; raging frantically,  
 inflamed, she raves [bacchatur] throughout the city—just  
 as a Bacchante when, each second year,  
 she is startled by the shaking of the sacred  
 emblems, the orgies urge her on, the cry  
 “o Bacchus” calls to her by night; Cithaeron  
 incites her with its clamor.

(*Aen.* IV.300–303)<sup>34</sup>

The simile’s insistence upon Dido’s hysteria as grotesque is an attempt to justify her abandonment by Aeneas.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Dante, who from the beginning shows his reader the foul nature of the “strega” who entrances him, Virgil must expose

Dido's menace to his readers, just as in the *Commedia* the character Virgilio reveals to the pilgrim the Siren's foul, Aenean "ventre."

That Dante viewed Dido's sexuality as central is clear from her placement in the circle of lust. Whereas Aeneas is listed along with Hector, Electra, Lavinia, Camilla, and Penthesilea (among others) in limbo, Dido is referred to twice in Canto V.<sup>36</sup> But as Dante well knew, Virgil's Dido is not merely a monstrous creature but a "femina"<sup>37</sup> who loves improperly, as she herself recognizes,<sup>38</sup> and it is this fault the pilgrim himself displays when he literally makes the "femmina balba" the object of his desire.

### Infernal Repetition: The Siren's "ventre" and the Belly of Hell

The "dolce serena" is explicitly the pilgrim's own creation, fashioned first out of the previous day's discourse ("l pensiero in sogno trasmutai," *Purg.* XVIII.141–45) and then, within the dream, out of the "femmina balba" transformed by Dante's gaze. The transformation thus presents the "serena" not only as a figure for improper love but, even more significantly, as an idol; the pilgrim seeks to follow his own creation, his false "Beatrice," "nel mezzo mar," rather than the true mediatrix who will lead to salvation.<sup>39</sup>

Our comprehension of the Siren's status as false Beatrice is enhanced by the vision of her true counterpart in the Earthly Paradise. Just as, while the pilgrim watches, "lo smarrito volto" of the "femmina" is "colored as love desires" (com'amor vuol, così le colorava), so in *Purgatorio* XXX, "Donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto / vestito di color di fiamma viva" (A lady appeared to me, beneath a green mantle, dressed in the color of a living flame; ll.32–33). But whereas Virgilio removes the Siren's covering garments (drappi) to expose her true nature, so this lady's veil<sup>40</sup> is removed to reveal Revelation itself. Moreover, in the correcting adverb of her self-proclamation, "Ben son, ben son Beatrice" (l.72), the true mediatrix emphasizes, as Joan Ferrante puts it, "that hers is the beauty [Dante] should have followed, always, not just while her body was before him on earth."<sup>41</sup>

But if the repetitive "io son . . . io son dolce serena" proleptically evokes Beatrice's felicitous arrival in the Earthly Paradise, it likewise recalls her appearance to Virgilio in *Inferno* II: "*I son Beatrice* che ti faccio andare" (l.70; my emphasis).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, again turning to Robert Hollander, the dream "recapitulate(s)" both the language and the "broad outlines" of Beatrice's descent to limbo:

[Virgilio] tells Dante how Beatrice came down to Limbo and directed him to lead the Pilgrim through Hell. She describes her lover as one who is attacked by death on the waters.[<sup>43</sup>] [Virgilio]'s description of her coming gives Dante heart to begin his trek through Hell. [In the dream] a sailor (namely Ulysses) is led astray in mid sea (the one who misleads him portrayed as a woman) and Beatrice appears to ask [Virgilio] to put her sailor back on the right

path, which he does in the dream by showing Dante the naked truth about the Siren as he has done earlier in the poem by showing us all of *Inferno*.<sup>44</sup>

I would amend the critic only by noting that while the Siren claims to have led Ulysses astray, more importantly, the pilgrim in the dream is being led astray.

The use of the word “smarrito” (XIX.14) recalls Beatrice’s words in *Inferno* II:

l’amico mio . . .  
ne la diserta piaggia e impedito  
sì nel cammin, che volt’è per paura; e temo che non sia già sì  
*smarrito*,  
ch’io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata (my emphasis)

(my friend . . . finds his way so impeded on the desert slope that he has turned back in fright and I fear he may already have gone so astray that I am late in arising to help him; 61–65),

a passage which in fact contains five words from *Inferno* I, especially the famous third line, “che la diritta via era smarrita.” In Hollander’s reading, “the poet displaces his own quality, that of being lost to the true way, making it a part of the capacity of the Siren: it is she who has led Ulysses and Dante astray.”<sup>45</sup> Yet what Hollander omits is that the “serena’s” powers are explicitly the pilgrim’s creation; her “smarrito volto” may be *emblematic* of her idolatrous identity as wrong object but it is his glance which transforms that face into one that could sink a thousand ships. Dante must smell her true, putrid nature, just as he must physically visit Hell in order to learn where his actions are leading him.

The parallel with Beatrice’s appearance to Virgilio in limbo is an important one, but Hollander’s analysis leaves one crucial—for me, central—aspect unexplored: the relationship between the “serena’s” stinking belly and the journey through Hell. For if the dream is indeed a repetition of the actions of *Inferno* II, then to reveal the Siren’s “ventre” must be to reveal *Inferno* itself.

The Siren—whether envisioned as harpy, Scylla, or Ovidian bird-woman—is a composite creature, a grotesque more fitting to *Inferno* than *Purgatorio*.<sup>46</sup> In representing the foulness of his “serena,” his new Scylla, Dante chooses not to use “utero” but rather the harpy-evoking “ventre,” a term that, in its association with greed and gluttony as well as lust, more fittingly represents the three sins about to be purged. Even more importantly, it recalls the language of the canticle in which Dante’s “arpie” appear: employed by the poet twelve times in his *Commedia*, “ventre” is used eight times in the *Inferno* (five in the “malabolgie”), always in circumstances that emphasize the monstrous physicality of the shades depicted.<sup>47</sup> But even more damning is the odor that connects her not to the spiritual life toward which the pilgrim is striving, but the death he hopes to abandon. In the writings of the church fathers, the distinction between the physical and the sensual—so easily blurred by the sense of sight, as the

"serena's" appearance makes clear—is more easily identified through smell. Virgins, according to Ambrose, exude the scent of spirituality, the "odor of life," while those who exist in the world of flesh bear the carnal "odor of death."<sup>48</sup> The shock of the Siren's "puzzo" is the shock of physicality, the odor of carnality, in a canticle where the emptiness, the "vanitate" of the shades is repeatedly underscored.<sup>49</sup> Thus, when Virgilio reveals the Siren's belly, he reveals her as an infernal figure, composite, deformed, disgusting, stinking; female sexuality is not merely monstrous, it is Hell.

If the Siren is linked to Hell, the analogy is similarly drawn between Hell and the female body. The *Inferno* is of course remarkable for its physicality, for the nakedness of its denizens, and the *contrappasso* that literalizes the metaphoric filth of their crimes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "malabolgie," the pockets of fraud in which the sowers of schism are split and the flatterers buried in ordure, while the air is full of the stench of rotting members.<sup>50</sup> As the sins punished become more foul, so too does Dante's language; thus the "malebranca" "avea del cul fatto trombetta" (makes of his ass a trumpet; *Inf.* XXI.139), while the formerly exquisite courtesan Thais scratches herself "con l'unghie merdose" (with shitty nails; XVIII.131). But most startling to both the reader and the pilgrim is the distortion of the human body that marks the sinners' distance from the God in whose image all were created.<sup>51</sup>

The absolute repugnance of the eighth circle has led Robert Durling to argue that the "bolgie" are the belly of Hell. In Durling's reading, Hell's structure is parallel to that of the human body: "the circles of incontinence [are] the head (for that is what the incontinent sinner loses), the circle of violence . . . the breast (where the two natures, human and bestial, are joined), the circles of fraud, the abdomen." Such a correspondence "draws upon the traditional notion of the Body of Satan as the infernal counterpart of the Body of Christ, the Church."<sup>52</sup> Durling's architectonic allegory leads him to see the distinction between Hell and Purgatory on the basis of their respective products; they are "differentiated by being associated with what is returned to the outer world in the two functions: Hell is the belly that produces shit; Purgatory is the belly that produces new life."<sup>53</sup> In a footnote, the critic adduces the "parallelism between the passageways in the rock of the Mountain of Purgatory and the troughs of the Malebolge."<sup>54</sup>

Durling's argument is intriguing and in many ways convincing: as he properly notes, "references to food, to cooking, to the various parts of the digestive tract, to excretion and excrement, are legion, along with allusions to some dozen diseases that were in Dante's time thought of as resulting from malfunction of the digestive system."<sup>55</sup> Yet ultimately, the fundamental analogy does not quite work. Souls, presumably, are continually released from Purgatory (while the earthquake that signals the release of Statius's soul is incomprehensible to Dante and Virgilio, the jubilant singing of "Gloria in excelsis" marks the other souls' recognition of this event as part of the purgatorial sequence); indeed, the function of Purgatory is precisely as a temporal and

temporary womb in which the soul prepares itself to be reborn in eternal glory.<sup>56</sup> In contrast to the souls of Purgatory, who suffer in order to be purged of their sins, the law of the *contrapasso* requires that the sinners of Hell be punished for what they are (they are filthy; they sit in filth; they are filth). Yet nothing is *excreted* from the Inferno. Durling explains the lack of correspondence by arguing that, “as the belly of Hell, the Malebolge are of course dysfunctional; they do not nourish, they poison the body of which they are a part, and they represent perhaps the most gigantic case of constipation on record” (p. 65). But in fact, two products do eventually emerge: Dante and his guide Virgilio, neither of whom is excrement, even if the latter is condemned to limbo. If I seem to belabor a rather distasteful point, it is because the distinction is significant: Dante is not shat out of the belly of Hell but rather reborn from its grotesque womb. This rebirth is then repeated just after the dream of *Purgatorio* XIX, thereby emphasizing the analogy between the vision of the “serena” and the journey through Hell.<sup>57</sup>

Virgilio’s grappling descent through Satan’s “folto pelo”—whose hairy repulsiveness recalls Manto’s equally grotesque “pilosa pelle” (XX.54), turned behind her—is clearly not a bowel movement:

e quando l’ali fuoro aperte assai,  
Appigliose a le vellute coste;  
di vello in vello giù discesi poscia  
tra ’l folto pelo e le gelate croste.  
(*Inf.* XXXIV.71–75)

(and when the wings were opened wide he caught hold on the shaggy sides; down from shag to shag he descended between the matted hair and the frozen crusts.)

Assisted by his male midwife Virgilio, the pilgrim turns to exit from Hell, just as a baby must turn itself to move into the birth canal.

Quando noi fummo là dove la coscia  
si volge, a punto in sul grosso de l’anche,  
lo duca, con fatica e con angoscia,  
volse la testa ov’elli avea le zanche,  
e aggrappossi al pel com’om che sale,  
sì che ’n inferno l’ credea tornar anche  
(ll.76–81)

(When we had come to where the thigh turns just on the thick of the haunch, my leader with labor and strain brought round his head to where his shanks had been and grappled on the hair like one who is climbing, so that I thought we were returning into Hell again.)

Finally, they “uscì fuor per lo foro d’un sasso” (l.85) to “ritornar nel chiaro mondo” and ultimately “riveder le stelle,” recalling the Italian term for child-birth, to “dare alla luce”—literally “to give into light.” Similarly, in *Purgatorio* XIX, after Virgilio, “fendendo i drappi” at the “donna santa’s” behest, exposes the Siren’s foul belly as infernal, he and the pilgrim pass beneath another set of wings—not the black wings of a bat but of a swan—to go once again through a small hole in the rock:<sup>58</sup>

Con l’ali aperte, che parean di cigno,  
volseci in su colui che si parlonne  
tra due pareti del duro macigno.  
(*Purg.* XIX.46–48)

(With open wings that seemed like a swan’s he who thus had spoken  
to us turned us upward between the two walls of hard rock.)

In medieval discussions of physiology and sin, the stomach is linked with the uterus, just as gluttony is related to lust. Indeed, my reading of the “serena” depends upon the synecdochical status of the word “ventre” (from the Latin “venter” meaning belly) for womb.<sup>59</sup> The contrast, however, between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* seems to me not one of digestion and reproduction (however closely related) but rather of functional as opposed to dysfunctional reproduction.<sup>60</sup> The reproductive analogy allows us to see Hell as a parodic version of Purgatory and certainly does not negate the presence of all the excrement adduced by Durling in support of his argument; we need only remember Augustine’s dictum, “inter faeces et urinam nascimur,” and the foul female body examined above.<sup>61</sup>

If we view the *Inferno* as a foul, female belly, we are thus in a position to understand the larger implications of the dream of the Siren, and of the monstrous nature of female physicality that the vision reveals. In a consideration of the specifically female grotesque body of fifteenth-century macaronic texts such as *Il Baldus*, Barbara Spackman notes this figure’s relationship to

the genealogy of the topos of the enchantress-turned-hag, a topos that opposes the beautiful enchantress (woman as lie) to the ugly, toothless old hag hidden beneath her artifice (woman as truth). From Dante’s “femmina balba” in *Purgatorio* 19 to Ariosto’s Alcina and Machiavelli’s “lavandaia” in his letter to Luigi Guicciardini, this topos effects a transfer through displacement: the *bocca sdentata* of the hag stands for the “other mouth,” the *vagina dentata*. Indeed, this particular female grotesque stands as the hermeneutic figure par excellence, for it would reveal truth beneath falsehood, plain speech beneath cosmetic rhetoric, essence beneath falsehood.<sup>62</sup>

Although the reference to the “femmina balba” is merely passing, Spackman’s argument has a special resonance for Dante, who makes explicit the implicit displacement. Moreover, if “the truth revealed in the *bocca sdentata* is

not only the truth but also “the-truth-about-woman,”<sup>63</sup> it is important that the “serena” is the false Beatrice, opposed to the “donna santa,” the true Beatrice who as mediatrix and figure of Christ will reveal the Truth to the pilgrim in the Earthly Paradise and beyond, and whose smile is so bright that Dante’s vision must be prepared for it. There, Beatrice will also reveal “the-truth-about-woman”; or at least about woman-as-physical-being.

### The False and True Mediatrices

Despite his journey through Hell, the dream of the “strega,” and his penance on the terrace of “luxuria,” it is only with the revelation of Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise that the pilgrim finally comprehends the petrifying and even infernal nature of terrestrial desire. For if the name of Beatrice is the lure that draws the pilgrim through the fire of lust to the Earthly Paradise, he still loves her in the wrong way; he can even forget her long enough to be attracted—improperly—to the beautiful Matelda. The repeated similes and examples of classical rape or unsuccessful love by which Matelda is described,<sup>64</sup> which highlight the failings of postlapsarian language to articulate an irretrievable world, simultaneously affirm the menace of the pilgrim’s sensual desire for this prelapsarian pure “donna,” and indeed of all such desire.

It is because of his improper love for her, his misreading of her beauty, that the pilgrim is chastised by his beloved. In her recriminating account of her lover’s failings after her death, Beatrice laments that although her “bellezza e virtù,” her beauty and virtue, increased in her passage from “carne a spirto” (flesh to spirit; XXX.121), the pilgrim no longer followed her, until finally no solution remained but to show him “le perdute genti” (l.138)—in other words, the action of the poem. Her speech, however, which follows the corrective “Ben son, ben son Beatrice” (l.72) already discussed above, describes not only the pilgrim’s behavior on earth but his actions within the dream; once again to turn “i passi suoi per via non vera / imagini di ben seguendo false” (his steps along a way not true, following false images of good; 130–31) is exactly what the Siren tempted him to do.

This repetition and coupling of the instances that precipitate both Dante’s journey and the events of the dream are summed up and underscored by Beatrice in the next canto:

. . . perchè mo vergogna porte  
 del tuo errore, e perchè altra volta,  
 udendo le serene, sie più forte,  
 pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta:  
 sì udirai come in contraria parte  
 mover dovieti mia carne sepolta.  
 Mai non t’appresentò natura o arte  
 piacer, quanto le belle membra in ch’io  
 rinchiusa fui, e che so’ ’n terra sparte;



e se 'l sommo piacer sì ti fallio  
 per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale  
 dovea trarre te nel suo disio?  
 (*Purg.* XXX.43–54)

(that you may now bear shame for your error, and another time, hearing the Sirens, may be stronger, lay aside the seed of tears and listen: so you shall hear how in opposite direction my buried flesh ought to have moved you. Never did nature or art present to you a pleasure so great as the beautiful members in which I was enclosed and now are scattered in the earth. And if the highest pleasure thus failed you by my death, what mortal thing should then have drawn you into desire for it?)

The “serene” to which Beatrice refers here are usually distinguished from the “serena” of the dream; Singleton, for example, interprets the former as “the allurements of the world and of the flesh, . . . [offering] a pleasure that is false in its promise.”<sup>65</sup> But the reference by the mediatrix to her own “belle membra,” now scattered in earth, and which recall the “fredde membra” of the “femmina balba” and their infernal associations, insists that even Beatrice’s body is implicated by the Siren. If death is the result of Eve’s sin, Beatrice’s “carne sepolta” is a *memento mori*, a startling reminder of the infernality of the flesh, of the putrefaction and decay that contaminate all physical beauty. Like the Virgin herself, a woman such as Beatrice may be an intermediary between God and man, but in the Earthly Paradise Beatrice emphasizes the essential distinction between body and spirit, between the “belle membra . . . sparte a terra” and the beautiful eyes that point toward God. As the “puzzo” of the “serena” reminds us, the body is infernal, and the physicality of postlapsarian woman is a danger.

Rachel Jacoff has examined the remarkable absence, in both theology and literature, of “an image of female desire that is not in and of itself transgressive.” “Semiramis, Myrrha, and Pasiphae—like the emblematic Siren in Dante’s central purgatorial dream—appear to be icons not only of transgressive female desire, but of the nature of all female desire, and, ultimately, perhaps of desire itself—any desire, that is, which is reluctant to relinquish ‘specific corporealities.’”<sup>66</sup> To view the Siren as a specifically infernal creature, and indeed the female body as a figure for Hell, confirms Jacoff’s argument. Beatrice’s words in the Earthly Paradise guide both pilgrim and reader to see the danger of any desire that, as Jacoff expresses it, “is reluctant to relinquish ‘specific corporealities.’” This is the meaning behind Beatrice’s criticism of Dante for too much love for her “belle membra” and behind the startling reminder that her “carne sepolta” is as foul as the belly of the “strega.” Like the Siren, Beatrice reveals, in Spackman’s term, “the-truth-about-woman”: the stench of physicality, of infernality, which contaminates all women and which Dante must remember next time he sees those sirens, now plural, showing that they are not unique, not specific, but ubiquitous.

### The Virgin Mary

Summarizing the lesson of all of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice's reminder of the "serene" serves to emphasize not only the danger of female physicality but indeed the threat of all earthly, physical ties, of a desire not directed toward God. As throughout the terraces of Purgatory, Mary is the anti-type—indeed, the antidote—for if the Earthly Paradise recalls the sin of the "antica matre," Paradise exalts the blessed mother, who, in San Bernardo's terms, "closes and anoints" the wound pierced by her forebear. The metaphor suggests the sexual aspect of the Fall, even as it insists upon Mary's purity. For the postlapsarian reader, Eve's beauty cannot be unambiguous, and Mary's inviolate body, uniquely devoid of desire, is both the antithesis of, and dependent upon, her ancestor's flawed nature.

The oxymorons that open Bernardo's prayer underscore the divine miracle through which not only "umana natura" (l.6) but the female body becomes so ennobled in Mary that "l suo fattore non disdegno di farsi sua fattura" (its Maker did not disdain to become its creation<sup>[67]</sup>; ll.4–6):

Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore  
per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace  
così è germinato questo fiore.  
(*Par.* XXXIII.7–9)

(In thy womb was rekindled the Love under whose warmth this  
flower in the eternal peace has thus germinated.)

Once again we find a woman's "ventre," but here ennobled to bear eternal peace rather than death, the flower of love rather than filth—the true paradox of pure physicality/physical purity. For if, as the angel Gabriel declares, Mary "conciplies *in utero*" (Luke 1:31; my emphasis), Elizabeth—even as her own child rejoices in "utero eius"—cries to the Virgin, "Benedictus fructus ventris tui," blessed is the fruit of your womb (1:42). A passage insisting on the physicality of pregnancy (the fetal John the Baptist moves inside his pregnant mother) extolls the unique sanctity of another womb's produce, affirming the paradox of the Incarnation. Mary's humanity ensures her son's, provides his flesh (*la faccia che più somiglia a Cristo*) as well as feeds it,<sup>68</sup> even as hers is a corporeality without original sin, as attested by her virgin birth, pain-free parturition—and assumption into heaven. Mary alone conceives without desire, for unlike other women she needs no orgasm for conception,<sup>69</sup> and her immaculate body escapes even death: assumed into Heaven, she is brought before her son, the King of Heaven, in the paradox that makes her "figlia del [suo] figlio."

Mary's body, then, is the anti-type to the Siren's quintessentially infernal body, a correction made explicit in *Paradiso* XXIII. After the pilgrim is momentarily blinded by the vision of Christ's glory in the Empyrean, Beatrice invites him to gaze upon her smile, and at her true meaning: "riguarda qual son io" (l.46). This is a crucial turning point—no voyage, the poet claims, for a

"picciola barca / . . . *che fendendo* va l'ardita prora" (my emphasis), recalling the "piccioletta barca" of *Paradiso* II (l.1). But "fendendo" echoes the moment in the dream central to our discussion, when Virgilio, "*fendendo i drappi*," reveals the stinking belly of the Siren. The lessons of both *Purgatorio* XIX and the Earthly Paradise are here repeated, for Beatrice immediately reminds the pilgrim that he must look beyond her beauty to the glories of this heavenly garden:

Perchè la faccia mia sì t'innamora,  
che tu non ti rivolgi al bel giardino. . . .  
Quivi è la rosa in che 'l verbo divino  
carne si fece; quivi son li gigli  
al cui odor si prese in buon cammino.  
(*Par.* XXIII.70–75)

(Why does my face so enamor you that you don't turn yourself to the fair garden which blossoms beneath the rays of Christ? . . . Here is the Rose wherein the Divine Word made itself flesh; here are the lilies by whose odor the good way was taken.)

The mediatrix directs the pilgrim's eyes away from her truly beautiful face, not toward a vision of carnality but toward the locus of Incarnation: the rose that held the Word made flesh, surrounded by lilies—followers in Christ's "*buon cammino*"—exuding a heavenly *odor* in marked contrast to the "puzzo" of infernality.<sup>70</sup>

The Virgin's "ventre . . . *fu* l'albergo del nostro disiro" (ll.104–5, my emphasis)—that is, her womb—was not the object of desire, but rather, transiently, its residence. So too, on earth, the mediatrix captures and redirects desire. In Paradise, however, desire is directed toward its one true object: God. As the light of Gabriel rises, the yearning devotion of the blessed is compared to the innocent and adoring love of a little child *after* suckling his mother's breast:

E come fantolin che 'nver' la mamma  
tendo le braccia, poi che 'l latte prese,  
per l'animo che 'nfin di fuor s'infiamma;  
ciascun di quei candori in sù si stese  
con la sua cima, sì che l'alto affetto  
ch'elli avieno a Maria mi fu palese.  
(*Par.* XXIII.121–26)

(And as an infant which, when it has taken the milk, stretches its arms toward its mother, the affection glowing forth, each of these splendors stretched upward with its peak, so that the deep love they had for Mary was made plain to me.)

The simile makes clear the distinction between "disiro" and love. Just as Mary is without desire, so here the happy souls reach for her not with the physical desire

of a child reaching toward his mother's breast for food—according to Augustine, a sign of original sin<sup>71</sup>—but with the yearning, pure love—“affetto”—of a child for its nurturing mother.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, in the comparison, the Virgin is loved literally in her own terms. To be like Christ, one must be as a child. If the Virgin's immaculate womb redeems the infernality of the “serena's” foul belly and of all corporeal desire, the “affetto” of the “candori” is the antidote to corporeal desire.

## Notes

1. All citations from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. with a commentary, Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press Bollingen Series, 1970). Singleton uses the Italian text edited by Petrocchi. Occasionally I have changed the translation slightly to make it more literal, if less articulate; such instances are footnoted.
2. I use the Italian name to distinguish between the character “Virgilio” who appears within Dante's poem and the historical poet Virgil.
3.
 

mi venne in sogno una femmina balba  
     ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta,  
     con le man monche, e di colore scialba.  
 Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta  
     le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,  
     così lo sguardo mio le facea scorta  
 la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava  
     in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto,  
     com' amor vuol, così le colorava.  
 Poi ch'ell'avea 'l parlar così disciolto,  
     cominciava a cantar sì, che con pena  
     da lei avrei mio intento rivolto.  
 “Io son,” cantava, “io son dolce serena,  
     che ' marinari in mezzo mar dismago;  
     tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!  
 Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago  
     al canto mio; e qual meco s'ausa,  
     rado sen parte; sì tutto l'appago!”  
 Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa,  
     quand' una donna apparve santa e presta  
     lunghezzo me per far colei confusa.  
 “O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?”  
     fieramente dicea; ed el venia  
     con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta.  
 L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria  
     fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre;  
     quel mi sveglia col puzzo che n'uscita.  
 Io mossi li occhi, e 'l buon maestro: “Almen tre

voci t'ho messe!" dicea, "Surgi e vieni;  
troviam l'aperta per la qual tu entre." (*Purg.* XIX.7–36)

(There came to me in a dream a woman, stammering, with eyes asquint and crooked on her feet, with maimed hands, and of sallow hue. I gazed upon her: and even as the sun revives cold limbs benumbed by night, so my look made ready her tongue, and then in but little time set her full straight, and colored her pallid face even as love desires. When she had her speech thus unloosed, she began to sing so that it would have been hard for me to turn my attention from her. "I am," she sang, "I am the sweet Siren who leads mariners astray in mid-sea, so full am I of pleasure [for others] to hear. I turned aside Ulysses—desirous of his journey—to my song; and whosoever abides with me rarely departs, so wholly do I satisfy him." Her mouth was not yet shut when a lady, holy and alert, appeared close beside me to put her to confusion. "O Virgilio, Virgilio, who is this?" she said fiercely; and he came on with his eyes fixed only on that honest one. The other he seized, and laid her bare in front, rending her garments, and showed me her belly: this waked me with the stench that issued therefrom. I turned my eyes, and the good master said, "At least three times I have called you! Arise and come; let us find the opening through which you may enter.")

4. The fifteenth-century Neoplatonist Cristoforo Landino reveals a simple allegory: "The three vices that follow result from too much and immoderate love for temporal good things, things not truly good but rather false. The poet wishes to demonstrate by this vision the false happiness which comes [from such things]" (Florence, n.d., p. 146; my translation). Likewise for Charles Singleton, the "femmina" symbolizes the sins of the flesh, "the *malo amor* . . . purged in the three upper circles of Purgatory" (*The Divine Comedy*, p. 146). C. H. Grandgent explicates the allegory as follows: "A hideous, impotent female—stammering, cross-eyed, handless, club-footed, pale—is gradually transformed, as Dante looks at her, into a siren of perilous beauty; thus evil desire, hateful and powerless at first, becomes alluring if we let our minds dwell upon it. [Reason] . . . gazing steadfastly on this pure image of Conscience [the 'donna santa'], never allowing his eyes to stray to the dangerous charms of the deceiver, discloses to the shocked dreamer the real foulness of her who has so attracted him. Even so, in one of the tales of Caesarius of Heisterbach (*Dialogus Miraculorum*, XII, chap. iv), a sweet-voiced cleric, who has bewitched all by his song, collapses, when exorcised, into a putrid corpse" (Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. and annot. C. H. Grandgent; revd. Charles S. Singleton [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972], p. 474). The parallel with Caesarius's narrative is perhaps instructive, but Grandgent's choice of that tale is problematic, as indeed is his gloss of the dream, for the critic neglects two of its crucial aspects. The pilgrim, as described by Dante, is not shocked: he is so absorbed by his dream that he has not heard Virgilio call him three times. He is awakened by the stench, not the vision, that awakens him, thus underscoring the physicality of this dreadful revelation. And the analogy between the "serena" and Caesarius's "sweet-voiced cleric" ignores the former's particularly female threat, a threat whose significance extends beyond the context of this canto and even this canticle to the entire poem.
5. Moreover, the line that follows Virgilio's gloss, "Bastiti, e batti a terra le calcagne," has an additional lapsarian resonance. The guide's exhortation is to look upward

toward the Earthly Paradise and ultimately Heaven, yet the word “calcagne,” “heels,” evokes God’s curse of the serpent. In Genesis 3, God curses the serpent, telling him: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his *heel* [calcaneo]” (my emphasis). The bruised heel is symbolic of the pride that was part of the Fall (described by Adam in *Paradiso* 26 as “trapassar”—overstepping—“il segno”), but it also prefigures the crucifixion of Christ, second Adam and son of second Eve. The only other use of “calcagne” in the *Commedia* is in the examples of pride carved into the pavement of *Purg.* XII.21.

6. “And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves girdles” (Genesis 3:7).
7. Cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIII.13: “The first human beings, as divine favour departed from them, straightway became ashamed of the nakedness of their bodies. Hence, they used fig leaves . . . in their embarrassment to cover their *pudenda* (shameful parts). These had been the same organs before, but had not then been shameful (*quae prius eadem membra erant, sed pudenda non erant*).” *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Latin text with English trans. Philip Levine (Loeb Classical Library; London: William Heineman; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 4:178–79.
8. “The husband, exempt from all seductive goading of passion, could have come to rest on his wife’s bosom with peace of mind undisturbed and pristine state of body intact. . . . [T]he male seed could have been dispatched into the womb of the fertile wife with no loss of female virginity (*integritate*), just as the menstrual flux can now be produced from the womb of a virgin with no loss of virginity. For the seed could be injected through the same passage by which the flux is ejected. And just as for parturition the female viscera might have been opened not by the groans of travail but by a natural impulse when the time was ripe, so the two sexes might have been united for impregnation and conception not by lustful craving (*libidinis appetitus*) but by an act of will.” *De Civitate Dei*, XIV.26, 397–99. I have altered Levine’s translation.
9. “Unto the woman He said: ‘I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.’ And unto Adam He said: ‘Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’” (Genesis 3:16–19).
10. *De Civitate Dei*, XIII.24. Cf. *De genesi ad litteram*, XI.32: “When Adam and Eve . . . lost their privileged state, their bodies became subject to disease and death, like the bodies of animals, and consequently subject to the same drive by which there is in animals a desire to copulate and thus provide for offspring to take the place of those that die. Nevertheless, even in its punishment the rational soul gave evidence of its innate nobility when it blushed because of the animal movement of the members of its body and when it imparted to it a sense of shame, not only because it began to experience something where there had been no such feeling before, but also because this movement of which it was ashamed came from the violation of the

divine command. In this, man realized with what grace he had previously been clothed when he experienced nothing indecent in his nakedness." John Hammond Taylor, S. J., *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman Press, 1982), II:165.

11. As James Turner notes in *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), "the essence of 'lust' and the source of sexual shame is not sexuality per se, but the unpredictability and autonomy of the penis. . . . *Libido* is . . . manifested as much by embarrassment, detumescence, and frigidity as by successful arousal" (pp. 44–45).
12. Tertullian, for example, places responsibility for the seduction of men directly on Christian women who do not use the veil: "I pray you, be you mother or sister or virgin-daughter . . . veil your head: if a mother for your sons' sakes; if a sister for your brethren's sakes; if a daughter for your fathers' sakes. All ages are imperilled in your person." *The Veiling of Virgins* 16 ANF 4, 37. Cited in Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: The Religious Significance of Female Nakedness in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 50.
13. Cf. *Civ. Dei*, XIII.13: "The first human beings, as divine favour departed from them, straightway became ashamed of the nakedness of their bodies. Hence they used fig leaves . . . in their embarrassment to cover their pudenda ('shameful parts'). These had been the same organs before, but had not then been shameful ('quae prius eadem membra erant, sed pudenda non erant')," pp. 178–79.
14. The prophet concludes this chapter with a list that constitutes a *contrapasso*; The punishment for such idolatrous vanity is the loss of all instruments of that vanity: "On that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their anklets, and their fillets, and the crescents; the pendants, and the bracelets, and the veils. . . . And it shall come to pass that,

Instead of sweet spices there shall be rottenness;  
And instead of a girdle, rags;  
And instead of curled hair, baldness;  
And instead of a stomacher, a girdling of sackcloth;  
Branding instead of beauty (3:18–24).

15. On Israel as harlot, see also Hosea 2:11–12, where the Lord declares that because of her harlotry, "Therefore will I . . . snatch away My wool and My flax / Given to cover her nakedness. / And now will I uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers."
16. 3:21: "And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins, and he clothed them." On God as clother of Israel, see the passage from Hosea cited above.
17. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
18. Cf., for example, the epistles of Paul such as that to the Ephesians, where he declares man to be "the head of the woman, as Christ is of the Church" (5:22). See also I Corinthians 11:7: "[Man] is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man."
19. *Timaues* 91a.
20. Pseudo Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum cum commento*. English translation as *Women's Secrets*, ed. and trans. Helen Rodnite LeMay (Albany: State University of

- New York Press, 1992), pp. 133–34. Pseudo Albertus Magnus incorrectly attributes this statement to Avicenna. See also Helen Rodnite LeMay, “Some Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Lectures on Female Sexuality,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies* 1.4 (1978): 378–90.
21. LeMay, “Some Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Lectures,” p. 394. Scot suggests that midwives should hide such women beneath the stairs or behind a door in a darkened room.
  22. There are various reasons why Dante might have thought Ulysses was entrapped by the sirens. Often cited is a passage from Cicero’s *De finibus* (V.xviii.49) that, taken by itself, might easily give the impression that Ulysses succumbed. For a brief discussion of this passage, see, among manifold others, Giorgio Padoan, *Il pio Enea, l’empio Ulisse: Tradizione classica e intendimento medievale in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, n.d.), pp. 200–204. Some scholars have argued that Dante has confused the sirens with Circe (although Dante’s Ulisse mentions his stay with Circe at *Inf.* XXVI.90–92) and with Calypso. For a summary of interpretations of Dante’s Siren, see the article of Giorgio Padoan in the *Enciclopedia dantesca* as well as *Il pio Enea*. Also see Robert Hollander, “Dante’s Siren/Harpy,” in *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Studies in the Italian Trecento in Honor of Charles S. Singleton*, ed. Aldo S. Bernardo and Anthony L. Pellegrin (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983), pp. 80–81. Hollander wisely suggests that “if no source we have been able to find puts Ulysses under a Siren’s sway, we should nonetheless probably have paid more attention to the sources of Sirenian material which we know Dante had ready to hand, whether or not they associate Ulysses with Sirens” (“Dante’s Siren/Harpy,” p. 81). Following his own advice, Hollander notes that while Dante “would take only the sense of Aeneas’ lack of interest in these creatures” from the concluding lines of *Aeneid* V (the poem’s only mention of the sirens), “we (and Dante) may see the bones of other sailors’ lost on their rocks (Virgil’s “scopulos sirenum”). Similarly Ovid, retelling the *Aeneid*, “reports that Aeneas sailed past *Sirenum scopulos* . . . , even if he did lose his helmsman. Thus, if Dante thinks of Ulysses as the negative counterpart of the voyager Aeneas, if he thinks of the sirens as creatures who attempt to lure sailors from their chosen paths, he would easily have been tempted to concoct, on his own authority, a Sirenian interruption in his concocted last voyage of Ulysses.” Dante’s Siren may also be lying; after all, Ulysses had recounted his journey to the pilgrim in *Inferno* XXVI.
  23. The gloss for the moral force of her threat can easily be located in, among others, Boethius: “Sed abite potius Sirenes usque in exitum dulces meisque eum Musis curandum sanandumque relinquit” (But be gone, ye Sirens, sweet unto death, and leave his curing and healing to my Muses). (*Consolation of Philosophy* . . . ) Indeed, the “donna santa e presta” has often been glossed as Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, an interpretation that does not account for the allusions to Beatrice’s role in both limbo and the Earthly Paradise discussed below.
  24. “Sirenas tres fingunt fuisse ex parte virgines, ex parte volucres, habentes alas et ungulas: quarum una voce, altera tibiis, tercia lyra caneant. Quae inlectos navigantes sub cantu in naufragium trahebant. Secundum veritatem autem meretrices fuerunt, quae transeuntes quoniam deducebant ad egestatem, his fictae sunt inferre naufragia. Alas autem habuisse et ungulas, quia amor et volat et vulnerat. Quae inde in



- fluctibus conmorasse dicuntur, quia fluctus Venerem creaverunt." *Isidori hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum libri xx*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (1911; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), XI.3.30–31. Cited in "Dante's Siren/Harpy," p. 82.
25. "Dante's Siren/Harpy," p. 85. Hollander concludes: "Thus Dante has made use of all of Virgil's description of the Harpies—except their birds' bodies and foul hunger—as a guide to our understanding of the nature of his sin in turning aside from Beatrice to the Siren. For not only was she not beautiful in any eyes but his, she was such a creature as would have led to despair and death, had he followed her Siren's song to shipwreck. Ulysses was precisely such a sailor; Dante is so no longer."
  26. "Dante's Siren/Harpy," p. 86, where Hollander credits his student Carl Frankel with this insight.
  27. All citations from *Virgil's Aeneid Books I–VI*, ed. Clyde Pharr (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1930). Translations are based on those of Allen Mandelbaum (1961; Toronto: Bantam Classics, 1981), with my emendations.
  28. Centaurs do appear twice in the *Inferno*, but they are clearly identified as such both times.
  29. Indeed, the episode is narrated by Aeneas during his stay with Dido. For the threat of Dido, see below.
  30. "At Scyllam caecis cohibet spelunca latebris / ora exserstantem et navis in saxa trahentem. / Prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo / pube tenus, *postremo* immani corpore pistrix / delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum."
  31. The use of "utero" recalls as well the Trojan horse (referred to as "utero" in *Aeneid* II), whose death-bringing rather than life-giving womb held the destruction of Troy, just as here the "utero luporum" perhaps suggests the potential destruction of the seed of the new Troy, the Roman Empire which will be founded by wolf nurslings.
  32. See *Aen.* IV:77–79: Nunc eadem labente die convivia quaerit, / Iliacosque iterum demens audire labores / exposcit pendetque iterum narrantis ab ore. (The day waning, she seeks to repeat the same banquet; insane, she prays to hear again the trials of Ilium. Again she hangs upon the teller's lips.)
  33. Similarly, Aeneas will literally look back at the smoke of the queen's funeral pyre at the beginning of Book V, which recounts the funeral games in memory not of Dido but Anchises.
  34. Saevit inops animi totamque incensa per urbem / *bacchatur*, qualis commotis excita sacris / Thyias ubi audito stimulant trieterica Baccho / *orgia* nocturnusque vocat clamore Cithaeron.
  35. Cf. Mihoko Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989): "By comparing Dido to a Bacchant, Virgil has her embody the threat of female sexuality and the threat of the violent mother against which Aeneas must defend himself"; pp. 114–15.
  36. The first reference, to "colei che s'ancise amorosa, / e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo" (she who killed herself for love, and broke faith with the ashes of Sychaeus), underscores the impropriety of her actions, while the omission of her name paradoxically emphasizes her presence by causing the reader to pause. Later, Francesca is said to be among the "schiera di Dido"—the group of "legendary oriental queens" in Rachel Jacoff's reading—"whose stories, particularly in virgilian form, reveal the

same constellation of political and erotic danger." Rachel Jacoff, "Transgression and Transcendence: Figures of Female Desire in Dante's *Commedia*," *Romanic Review*, 130.79 (1988): 129–42. John Freccero notes, in his discussion of the encounter with Medusa ("Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit"), that Virgilio protects the pilgrim because Aeneas, in Virgil's poem, has overcome passion: "In the struggle between individual desire and providential destiny, Virgil's Aeneas is the man who renounces self in the name of his mission. It is for this reason that he helps the pilgrim avert his glance until Beatrice shows the way to a reconciliation of human love with the divine plan." Reprinted in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 131. Freccero's point seems a bit overstated, but Virgilio is often a mediating figure in encounters with antiquity (Medusa, Ulysses, the siren, for example).

37. Cf. *Aen.* I.364: "Dux femina facti" (A woman was the leader of the deed).
38. Virgilio's gloss subtly insinuates the dream's Aenean resonance, for the phrase "antica strega" may well be a conscious allusion to Dido's own words of self-recognition when she falls in love with Aeneas, a sentiment she knows must be rejected in deference to the laws of shame and her duties as widow: "agnosco veteris vestigia flammae" (I recognize the signs of the ancient flame; *Aen.* IV.23). She continues, "Sed mihi vel tellus optem prius ima dehiscat / vel pater omnipotens abigat me fulmine ad umbras, / pallentis umbras Erebo noctemque profundam, / ante, pudor, quam te violo quae tua iura resolvo" (ll.24–27). (But I should call upon the earth to gape / and close above me, or on the almighty / Father to take his thunderbolt, to hurl / me down into the shades, the pallid shadows / and deepest night of Erebus, before / I'd violate you, Shame, or break your laws!) When Beatrice first appears to him in the Earthly Paradise, Dante twice alludes to this line to emphasize the improper manner in which he has loved his mediatrix. First the poet tells the reader "d'antico amor senti la gran potenza" (l.39). Less than ten lines later the pilgrim turns to his guide "per dicere . . . conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma" (l.48), knowing that Virgilio will understand the precise significance of the allusion, only to find that Virgilio is gone. See below.
39. Like the Medusa, her infernal counterpart the siren threatens what John Freccero has termed "petrification," a sensual fascination and potential entrapment precluding further progress, which is a form of idolatry, for as Freccero submits, "to refuse to see in human desire an incompleteness that urges the soul on to transcendence is to remain within the realm of creatures"; "Medusa," p. 130. On idolatry, cf. Romans 1:24–25: "For this reason God has given them up to the vileness of their own desires, and the consequent degradation of their bodies, because they have bartered away the true God for a false one, and have offered reverence and worship to created things instead of to the Creator, who is blessed for ever."
40. Cf. *Purg.* XXX.64: "vidi la donna che pria m'appario / velato sotto l'angelica festa" (I saw the lady who first appeared to me veiled beneath the angelic celebration).
41. Joan Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature: From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 145. Ferrante also notes a connection between the Siren of the second dream and Lia (Leah) of the third: "Dante counters the attraction of the siren with Lia, who appears in the next dream and represents the real beauty of the active life. Her words and rhymes echo the siren's as a subtle indication of the contrast. The siren sings 'Io son . . . io son dolce

- serena' (XIX.19) and uses *dismago, vago appago*, as rhymes in her song (ll.20–24); Lia sings 'io mi son Lia' (XXVII.101) and uses *smaga, vaga, appaga* (ll.104–8)."
42. If the Siren is a false Beatrice, she seems to be a false Lucia as well. When the pilgrim awakens after his first dream to find himself literally transported up the mountain, Virgilio tells him he has been carried by Lucia: "venne una donna, e disse: 'l' son Lucia; / lasciatemi pigliar costui che dorme; / si l'agevolero per la sua via.'" The saint's fortuitous mediation becomes in the second dream negative, leading not to the "via dritta" but "smarrita": "io son dolce serena / che ' marinari in mezzo mar dismago."
43. Lucia asks Beatrice, "non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte / su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanta-?" (ll.107–8).
44. Hollander, "Dante's Siren/Harpy," pp. 141–42. Central, according to Hollander, is the correspondence between the similes concerning love's effects:

Quali i fioretti, dal notturno gelo  
 chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca  
 si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,  
 tal mi fec'io di mia virtute stanca,  
 e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse,  
 ch'i' cominciai come persona franca. (*Inf.* II.127–32)

(As little flowers, bent down and closed by chill of night, straighten and all unfold upon their stems when the sun brightens them, such in my faint strength did I become; and so much good courage rushed to my heart that I began, as one set free.)

Virgil's words about Beatrice have a warming effect upon the fearful Dante. In the simile that begins in the fourth line of the dream, Dante's gaze is like the sun that warms the limbs (not flowers, to be sure) made heavy by night, for it gives the "femmina balba" the power of speech, color in her cheeks, and . . . makes her erect. The similar rhythms and meanings of the two similes are probably enough, but the repetition of the verb "drizzare" is further proof that Dante was thinking back to the earlier passage. The love that Dante lavishes upon the Siren is a perverse imitation of the love that Beatrice has lavished upon him.

45. Hollander, "Dante's Siren/Harpy," p. 143.
46. For example, Geryon, Cerberus, the Centaurs.
47. In addition to the description of the "arpie" cited above, "ventre" is used in the depiction of the monstrous Cerberus: "Li occhi ha vermiglie, la barba unta e atra, / e 'l ventre largo, e unghiate le mani" (VI.17); and the giant Nimrod, creator of the tower of Babel: "e io scorgeva già d'alcun la faccia / le spalle e 'l petto e del ventre gran parte, / e per le coste giù ambo le braccia" (XXXI.47). The remaining usages are in the "malebolgie," the circle of Hell in which fraud is punished, where we find the distorted bodies of the soothsayers: "Arona è quel ch'al ventre li s'atterga" (XX.46); the transformation of the thieves, when two snakes combine to become a monster: "le cosce con le gambe e 'l ventre e 'l casso / divenner membra che non fuor mai viste" (XXV.74); and the diseased falsifiers lying atop each other: "qual sovra 'l ventre e qual sovra le spalle / l'un de l'altro giacea" (XXIX.67–68). In Canto XXX, Gianni Schicchi comes at Capocchio and sticks tusks in his neck to drag him

- along the ground, "grattar li fece il *ventre* al fondo sodo" (XXX.30; my emphasis), and Master Adam is insulted by Sinon: "l'acqua marcia / che 'l ventre innanzi a li occhi si t'assiepa!" (XXX.123).
48. "Present your hands to your nostrils and explore the unwearied and ever-watchful alacrity of mind, the perfume of your deeds. . . . Your limbs will be redolent with the odour of the resurrection, the Cedars of Lebanon; your fingers will exude myrrh." (Ambrose, *On Virginity*, cited in *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, by Joyce E. Salisbury [New York: Verso, 1991]).
  49. Cf. Statius to Virgilio, *Purg.* XXI.136: "Or puoi la quantitate / comprender de l'amor ch'a te mi scalda, / quan'io dismento nostra vanitate, / trattando l'ombre come cosa salda" (Now you may comprehend the measure of the love that burns in me for you, when I forget our emptiness and treat shades as solid things). See also the Virgilian allusion at *Purg.* II.79ff., when the pilgrim attempts to embrace Casella: "Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!" Virgilio and Sordello do embrace in *Purgatorio* VI.
  50. In one of the *Inferno's* most startling and repulsive similes, Dante compares the stench of the tenth "bolgia" to that of all the hospitals of Valdichiana, Maremma, and Sardinia between July and September: "Tal era quivi, e tal puzzo n'usciva / qual suo venir de le marcite membre" (*Inf.* XXIX.46–51).
  51. Despite having been chastised (while a pilgrim) by Virgilio for weeping at such distortions (ancora se tu de li altri sciocchi; XX.27), the poet suggests we would have wept as well.
  52. Robert Durling, "Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell," in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 65. Cf. *De genesi ad litteram*, 11.24.31–25.32.
  53. Durling, "Deceit and Digestion," p. 84.
  54. Durling, "Deceit and Digestion," p. 93n.
  55. Durling, "Deceit and Digestion," p. 65. He continues, "Several of the Malebolge are filled with fluids, and such punishments as those of the barrators, who are boiled in pitch (*Inferno* XXI–XXII); the thieves, who undergo changes and exchanges of form, incineration, agglutination (*Inferno* XXIV–V); the simoniacs, who are burned by oily flames (*Inferno* XIX); and the flatterers, who are immersed in shit (*Inferno* XVIII) involve sharply focussed parodies of cooking and digestion."
  56. Cf. the simile at *Purg.* XX.130: "Certo non si scoteo sì forte Delo, / pria che Latona in lei facess' 'l nido / a parturir li due occhi del cielo." The reference to the birth of the gods Apollo and Diana, combined with the souls' jubilant chorus, invites the reader to think of another divine birth. Like the shepherds who heard the rejoicing of the heavenly host (Luke 2:9), Dante and Virgilio are fearful. The earthquake also recalls the earthquake at Christ's harrowing of Hell, thus evoking the paradox of Christ's death and rebirth, which is a rebirth for all believers.
  57. I thank Sharon James for first suggesting this analogy to me.
  58. See also ll.66–79 (quanto si *fende* / la roccia per dar via a chi va suso), where "fende," cleft, recalls the display of the belly, "fendendo I drappi."
  59. The word "utero" (Latin, "uterus," from the Greek "husterus") is linked etymologically to the Sanscrit "udaram," "belly," whence our English "udder."
  60. Thomas Laqueur discusses the perceived physiological affinity between generation and nutrition, eating and procreation evidenced by ancient and medieval medical

treatises: "a woman ingesting and a woman conceiving are engaged in analogous functions; food eaten when one has no appetite is not properly digested, and seed received by a woman when she has no sexual urge is not retained"; *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 51. Laqueur quotes Soranus: "as it is impossible for the seed to be discharged by the male, in the same manner, without appetite it can not be conceived by the female." This conception of the woman's "appetite" for sex is important for our discussion.

61. The epitome of this dysfunctional reproduction can be seen in the figure of the misshapen Master Adam, "fatto a guisa di leuto" (*Inf.* XXX.49). Master Adam's distempered belly may be, as Durling submits, a womb pregnant with social disaster (like the Trojan horse that Sinon recalls both by his own presence and by the blow he administers to Adam's belly in an allusion to *Aeneid* II). Yet even more importantly, this "ventre" full of "acqua marcia" has a biblical resonance as well, recalling the woman accused of adultery in Numbers 5, whose grotesquely bloated yet sterile body, from which no issue will ever come, is a sign not of pregnancy but of the woman's infidelity and, more specifically, of her lie. According to Mosaic law, if a man is jealous of his wife without proof, he must bring both his wife and the appropriate offerings to the priest, who, bearing in his hand "the water of bitterness (*acqua amarissima*) that causeth the curse . . . shall cause [her] to swear with the oath of cursing" that if she "be defiled" and has lain with a man other than her husband, "the Lord make thee a curse and an oath among thy people, when the Lord doth make thy thigh to fall away, and thy belly to swell; and this water that causeth the curse shall go into thy bowels, and make thy belly to swell, and thy thigh to fall away." If the woman "be not defiled, but be clean, then she shall be cleared, and shall conceive seed" (Numbers 5:11–31). In other words, the consequence of this test by the "acqua" is either a false or true pregnancy. Hell, then, can be seen as just such a false pregnancy.
62. Spackman, "Inter musam et ursam moritur: Folengo and the Gaping 'Other' Mouth," in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Marily Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 22.
63. Spackman, "Mouth," p. 23.
64. Matelda is compared to Proserpina before she was raped by Pluto (ll.49–51) and to Venus, when, wounded by Cupid, she fell in love with Adonis (ll.64–66). The water of Lethe is as hateful to the pilgrim as the water that divided Leander from his beloved Hero (ll.73–75). Cf. Robert Hollander, *Allegory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 154.
65. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 763. Singleton cites Dante's *Epist.* V.13: "Nec seducat alludens cupiditas more Sirenum nescio qua dulcedine vigiliam rationis mortificans" (Nor let illusive greed seduce you, siren-like, doing to death, by some charm, the vigil of reason).
66. Jacoff, "Transgression and Transcendence," p. 142.
67. Singleton has "creature."
68. Cf. the image of the breast-feeding Virgin or "Madonna lactans," an extremely popular image in late medieval and early Renaissance Italy, which emphasizes the humanity and humility of both mother and child. For the theological significance

- of such representations in the fourteenth century see Naomi Yavneh, "To Bare or Not Too Bare: Sofonisba Anguissda's 'Nursing Madonna and the Womanly Art of Breastfeeding'" in *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregivers in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Naomi Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).
69. For the necessity of orgasm to conception in medieval views of sexuality, see Laqueur, *Making Sex*.
70. Cf. II Corinthians 2:14: "Deo autem gratias, que semper triumphat nos in Christo Iesu, et odorem notitiae suae manifestat per nos in omni loco." (But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ Jesus, manifesting through us the odor of his knowledge in every place.)
71. Cf. Augustine's *Confessions*, I.7, where he identifies a baby's cries for food as the sign of his original sin: "What sins, then, did I commit when I was a baby myself? Was it a sin to cry when I wanted to feed at that age? . . . We root out these faults and discard them as we grow up, and this is proof enough that they are faults."
72. Psalm 131 is suggestive here: "Surely I have stilled and quieted my soul; / *Like a weaned child with his mother*, / My soul is with me like a weaned child" (my emphasis).

## CHAPTER 6

### *“A la tetta de la madre s’apprende”: The Monstrous Nurse in Dante’s Grammar of Selfhood*

GARY P. CESTARO



I would like to situate my reading of Lady Grammar in Dante and medieval culture within recent definitions of sexual difference and what has come to be known as monster theory. To that end, I must outline elements of a reading that I have elsewhere presented in detail and that will form the basis for my forthcoming book.<sup>1</sup> My analyses locate within Dante an implicit theory of the speaking subject as constructed in language and predicated upon a rejection, or repression, of something logically and chronologically prior, which is for Dante and many of his predecessors the nurturing female body. In its strictest medieval formulations, culture is predicated upon a rejection of nurturing female corporeality.

My readings focus considerable energy on the medieval category of grammar as an important site of representation for the speaking subject in the Middle Ages. The first of the liberal arts, the very source of linguistic regulation, gateway to Latin culture and rite of initiation into the adult male social economy, grammar envelops a fascinating complex of cultural norms and anxieties. Medieval descriptions of grammar both verbal and visual consistently recall the scene of nurturing in the mother’s body. More specifically, the medieval imagination regularly draws a parallel between the passage from vernacular to Latin (mother tongue to patriarchal regulation, the experience of grammar) at the onset of that life stage called “*pueritia*” (seven years old) and the earlier passage from infancy to speech, from the scene of suckling to the loss of the mother’s breast.<sup>2</sup> Allegorizations of Lady Grammar, particularly in and after the

twelfth century, typically portray a nursing mother and, in some cases, a wet-nurse, who offers one breast while blocking access to the other with rod or whip.

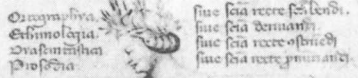
Thus there inhere in medieval representations of grammar traces of the discipline's shifting ground: a birthmark, if you will, that threatens to unveil the primal scene of symbolic language in corporeal desire. On one level grammar constitutes itself as a discipline by rejecting the mother tongue for an ordered system of language as proper, binary exchange. Grammar would remove the body from language. But because of its liminal status—its positioning as constructor and protector of borders located on the border itself—the grammatical imagination peers beyond the frontier.

Such a definition of medieval grammar embraces recent critical discussions of the monster as marginal or exterior figure that at once reflects a culture's fears and secret inner desires. Certainly by the twelfth century, Lady Grammar constituted such a monstrous cultural body. In a recent collection of critical essays on the monstrous, editor Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers by way of introduction seven theses for "understanding cultures through the monsters they bear."<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the Middle Ages produced a host of grotesque bodies more strikingly monstrous than Lady Grammar, as several of the essays in Cohen's volume attest.<sup>4</sup> But unlike, say, Sciapods or Saracens—who were firmly situated on the threatening margin of culture—Lady Grammar stood at once squarely within and upon a permeable boundary. As such, she constitutes a discursive site in some ways richer in monstrous meaning than those more obvious choices—to the extent that the monster, as Cohen insists, is paradoxically both outside and inside. Thus while Lady Grammar was clearly not a fire-breathing dragon, there hovered about her an insidious air of monstrousness. Here the many-limbed practitioner of dark wizardry,<sup>5</sup> there a superhuman nurse overflowing with milk,<sup>6</sup> elsewhere a quasi-hermaphroditic gender hybrid,<sup>7</sup> she embodied terror for generations of medieval schoolboys.<sup>8</sup>

My articulation of medieval grammar has been significantly influenced by the work of Julia Kristeva, and specifically by her notion of the semiotic "chora."<sup>9</sup> Kristeva has focused on the symbiotic union between infant and maternal body that defines early mental life and anticipates the advent of the subject/object binary, the logic of symbolic exchange and eventually language proper. Kristeva borrows from Platonic cosmology to label this space of maternal authority "chora,"<sup>10</sup> wherein the infant-not-yet-subject begins to attach a kind of precocious meaning to bodily drives at a time when it has no firm sense of the mother's body as discrete object. Always already moving toward separation into subject and object and thus the birth of desire proper in language, this infant-mother continuum is marked by the flow and stases of bodily functions and the beginnings of desire in, and eventually for, the maternal body. Noting that "chora" is coterminous with infant vocalizations, Kristeva characterizes it as a musical and rhythmic motility that precedes and underlies language as a clear-cut system of symbolic exchange, a motility where the developing subject enacts in intimate corporeal terms the processes of absorption and repulsion,



De grammatica dicitur an  
quatinus. li. ut dicitur  
retractationem. qm sic di  
finit. li. 2. soliloquiorum  
suorum.



Lady Grammar Nursing Her Pupil, from Bartolomeo di Bartoli da Bologna's poem *Canzone delle virtù e delle scienze*, fourteenth century. Reprinted from *Canzone delle virtù e delle scienze*, edited by Leone Dorez (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1904). The manuscript of the poem is in the library of the Musée Condé in Chantilly, France.

displacement and condensation eventually necessary for language acquisition. Thus while implicating a corporeal signifying practice, “chora” predates the full-blown linguistic signifier that substitutes bodily drive with a sign. Not yet symbolic, “chora” is nonetheless semiotic.<sup>11</sup>

For Kristeva, semiotic “chora” endures as a constant of adult mental life. Necessary to language and subjectivity as buttressing “other,” the semiotic simultaneously threatens these symbolic constructs by recalling that early space where binary distinctions (subject/object, signifier/signified) collapse in bodily drives.<sup>12</sup> Kristeva has located semiotic drive in a variety of aesthetic discourses, from medieval mysticism to Renaissance painting to modernist poetry.<sup>13</sup> More recently, she has broadened her consideration of the semiotic body to include cultural notions of the horrific and the monstrous. As the primal site of collapse (between subject and object, life and death), the maternal body must lie at the base of any cultural definition of monstrosity.<sup>14</sup> Kristeva provides a theory of the speaking subject threatened by a monster from within; precisely here, subjectivity theory and monster theory intersect. Late medieval representations of grammar as Lady Grammar visually dramatize Kristeva’s theory. While not a monster per se, Lady Grammar expertly represents the monster that inheres in human subjectivity.

For Kristeva, the semiotic erupts into symbolic, patriarchal discourse to expose the arbitrary nature of its categories; it thus provides a potentially powerful critical tool for feminism. Yet many feminist thinkers reject Kristeva as a kind of biological determinist who insists, curiously, on motherhood as a subversive strategy for women that forever bars them from full and proper subjectivity, which is for these thinkers tantamount to excluding women from real political power. Judith Butler is among Kristeva’s most eloquent and incisive critics.<sup>15</sup> In the following, I will suggest ways in which Lady Grammar enacts Kristeva’s theory of the speaking subject, but I will also argue that she can be read through Butler’s critique. That is to say, I will argue that Lady Grammar performs sexual difference for late medieval culture and thus opens a critical space for the interrogation of gender as a cultural discourse.

The allegorical tradition of grammar is long and varied, and merits the sort of historical specificity and nuanced description I cannot attempt here. Interestingly enough, in antiquity and the early patristic period, when the binary vernacular/Latin is, to say the least, problematic, thinkers such as Quintilian and then again Jerome insist on the crucial importance of the nurse as a first grammar teacher for the young boy. Considerable anxiety is expended over the purity of the nurse’s speech and milk, as though the very phonemes of language were absorbed with those first draughts.<sup>16</sup> Augustine at least wants us to believe that Latin is the mother tongue: he grows weepy with maternal affection (as though for Monica herself) at the thought of his Latin education, which was no education at all really, rather a spontaneous mode of expression gained without

effort amidst the tender caresses of his nurses. His father will haul him off to grammar school, Greek, and the master's whip.<sup>17</sup>

Lady Grammar as harbinger of discipline, the discipline of grammar, comes into being in the early fifth century with Martianus Cappella's codification and allegorization of the seven liberal arts, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*.<sup>18</sup> Allegorized as female, she is anything but nurturing and maternal. Her various, nefarious implements promise suffering, torturous pain, and include a file divided into eight sections (the eight parts of speech), which she will use to sharpen teeth and thus correct solecisms. Martianus's laborious description exercised huge influence for centuries, particularly over an iconographical tradition that depicted Lady Grammar as something of a monster.

The twelfth century effects a notable maternalization of grammar. In the *Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury insists, Quintilian-like, on the role of the nurse in first-language acquisition, but he cherishes Lady Grammar, too, as our "first nurse" (*altrix prima*), who "takes us all as tender babes, newly born from nature's bosom. It nurses us in our infancy, and guides our every forward step in philosophy."<sup>19</sup> Part mother, part monster, Lady Grammar occupies an uneasy, liminal space somewhere between Nature and culture, infancy and speech, as she arrives in Dante's Italy. As Alan of Lille demonstrates and several manuscript illuminations confirm, she is a hybrid who offers one breast for nourishment while refusing access to the other. "With the whip she makes the milk more bitter, with the milk she makes the whip more mild. . . . [S]he is both father and mother."<sup>20</sup>

In the thirteenth century, Boncompagno da Signa, proud and (at least by himself) celebrated rhetorician, casts scorn upon grammar for its infantile proximity to the nurse's body. He compares the "grammaticus" to a baby who sucks milk and whose teeth are just sprouting.<sup>21</sup> In this same passage from the *Rhetorica novissima*, Boncompagno further belittles the grammarian for his obsession with the phonic materiality of language in proper sequence to the total exclusion of actual content, meaning as symbolic exchange. In Boncompagno's view, this allows the grammarian to preside over monstrous births and sacrilegious equivalences: "He can only judge physical sounds, for he maintains that it is fine and in line with the rules to say 'the fly gives birth to the lion' or 'an angel is a chimera.'"<sup>22</sup> Boncompagno takes pains to underscore the brevity of his contact with grammar and heaps scorn upon what for him is the oxymoron of an "adult grammarian": "an old goat sucking at the udders of a young nanny."<sup>23</sup>

Medieval representations of grammar reflect what Kristeva (with the help of anthropologist Mary Douglas), in a 1980 essay entitled *Powers of Horror*, defines as a ritual of defilement. Through such rituals of rejection (or, Kristeva will specify, "ab-jection"), the subject defines its clean and proper body (le corps propre) by attempting to distance itself from that which threatens the

subject/object binary: the non-object or ab-ject. For Kristeva, as we have seen, this non-object is inextricably bound up with maternal authority and a space of bodily signification, which she calls “semiotic,” that underlies and occasions the birth of the subject in language proper. Douglas herself teaches that the threat of filth or pollution resides not in a given object, rather only in its relation to a boundary: filth represents the other side of a border. Kristeva quotes from Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*: “Matter issuing from [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body.” In fine structuralist form, Douglas then goes on to warn: “The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.” “Pollution,” she tells us, “is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined.”<sup>24</sup> Such is the space of medieval grammar.

While building itself up as logic and delimiting discipline, medieval grammar, as though in spite of its pretense to reason, recalls pre-subjective, pre-linguistic maternal authority experienced primarily as oral frustration and prohibition in the act of suckling. Here Kristeva locates a precocious universe of signification that anticipates the subject/object binary that founds ego and language:

Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. It is . . . a primal mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say that, while being the precondition of language, it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of linguistic signs nor of the symbolic order they found.<sup>25</sup>

Language, like culture, sets up a separation and order precisely by repressing maternal authority and this primal corporeal mapping. Kristeva then asks, “what happens to such a repressed item when the legal, phallic, linguistic symbolic establishment does not carry out the separation in radical fashion—or else, more basically, when the speaking being attempts to think through its advent in order better to establish its effectiveness?”<sup>26</sup> It seems to me that Dante is such a “speaking being” in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, to which I now briefly turn.<sup>27</sup>

Now Dante is nothing if not a borderline subject in that treatise. Composed in 1304 shortly after his exile from Florence, the *De vulgari* finds Dante on the border between Florence and exile, infancy and speech, vernacular and grammar, Eden and Babel. On a hunt for grammatical Italian, the *De vulgari* grammarian is, like any grammarian, a drawer of lines (we recall the etymology of “grammatica” from the Greek “gramma”—letter, line). Close attention to the metaphorical detail of the treatise, however, brings these various lines into homologous relief and, perhaps most significantly, suggests the logical and chronological privilege of the line that separates the infant from the

mother's breast. The *De vulgari* effects a bold conflation of the paradigms of universal history and individual experience while drawing parallels among the loss of maternal nourishment, the loss of the mother tongue in grammar, exile from Florence, and banishment from Eden and the Adamic *Ursprache*. While the treatise's dominant grammatical voice goes about the rational business of constructing categories and subcategories, approving some words and excluding many others, another, more poetic sensibility cannot help but sense the arbitrary nature of these lines in the face of the greater dispersive flow of language in history and human desire in the mother's body.<sup>28</sup> Thus in a much more complex and deeply personal way, the *De vulgari*, like medieval images of grammar as discipline, founds itself upon the act of excluding maternal authority.

In book 1 of the treatise, Dante equates "grammatica" to logic and reason, "a certain unalterable identity of speech unchanged by time and place" acquired only by few after long and assiduous study.<sup>29</sup> Much like Augustine, he fondly recalls the vernacular as mother tongue, a mode of expression in which infants are not so much trained as gently made familiar by those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds as words.<sup>30</sup> To put it simply, the vernacular is that language we acquire without any rules by imitating our nurse.<sup>31</sup>

The treatise announces itself as a defense of the mother tongue. Dante finds the vernacular attractive precisely because it constitutes a natural, universal mode of speech; it is the language of all, including women and children. The *De vulgari*'s paradoxical ambition, of course, is somehow to regularize, to "grammaticize," this maternal mode. But the rational grammarian soon loses sight of his initial, lacteal enthusiasm in order to launch his project of exclusion. And what he aims to exclude, to chop away and root out (borrowing Dante's own imagery), is the mother's body. On some level, he emulates a language outside of history, the prelapsarian language of Adam, a man—Dante tells us—who knew neither mother nor milk.<sup>32</sup> We are perhaps then not surprised when toward the end of the first book we are told to think of the ill-defined illustrious vernacular as a kind of paterfamilias, a stabilizing hinge on which the linguistic and social order must revolve.<sup>33</sup>

In book 2, the grammarian separates good words from bad, and the womanly, baby-talk words (*muliebria*, *puerilia*)—those that lie so perilously close to the irrational origins of language in drive energy—are the first to go: "mommy and daddy."<sup>34</sup> The grammarian applies a finer filter to separate city words (*urbana*) from those of the wilderness (*silvestria*). But even within the walled city lie words that threaten signifying excess: slippery, oily, bristling words that overflow with sound.<sup>35</sup> Words, he then suggests (as though pulling them arbitrarily out of a hat), like "*femina et corpo*": the female body.

As the foundation of medieval linguistic regulation, Lady Grammar filled a policing function, to be sure.<sup>36</sup> My readings demonstrate that the border she guarded—clearly linguistic—was also social,<sup>37</sup> moral,<sup>38</sup> national,<sup>39</sup> and sexual; it was a border that would foreclose to cultural bodies the anarchic realm of corporeal pleasure, drive libido, and mental transgression. "From its position at

the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes."<sup>40</sup> Lady Grammar simultaneously beckoned and prohibited. He who dared ignore her prohibition and follow her siren signal risked cultural ruin. Contaminated by Circe, having failed to bury the nurse Caeta, rejecting the grammar of heterosexual family, Ulysses moved beyond Hercules' pillars to the open sea and thus, in a universe of Christian definition, certain death.<sup>41</sup> A body at once regulated and fluid, Hercules' pillars and Ulysses' open sea, Lady Grammar signified repulsion and seduction, anxiety and desire, and thus precisely evoked, as we have seen, that which Kristeva calls ab-jection.<sup>42</sup>

Lady Grammar was a cultural symbol, an imaginative construction, an artifact. There was never any question of her representing a real flesh-and-blood being.<sup>43</sup> But as a cultural symbol she became overdetermined: she ended up standing for much more than one of the liberal arts, embracing (or perhaps even constituting) as she did a complex array of medieval cultural assumptions about language and gender. The hybrid portraits of the twelfth century and beyond that cast her as nurturing and prohibitive, mother and father, merely crystallized the elements of a cultural discourse that had been attendant upon grammar for centuries. The passage from the present to the absent breast, from milk to whip, and thus from female to male as a movement from Nature to culture, was plotted upon the body of Lady Grammar in support of a host of other discourses of social power (vernacular/Latin, dialect/Italian, city-state/nation).

If Lady Grammar seems to rehearse Kristeva's theory of the speaking subject, she also presents a dramatic instance of how a culture constructs its "other" within official discourse. She offers a clear visual literalization of culture's primal gesture of exclusion through sexual difference. Official culture drew a line between male and female on the body of Lady Grammar, a line that bore a heavy and varied classificatory burden. With this unique allegorization, official culture created and promoted the notion of a pre-cultural body (female, maternal, mute, vernacular, affective) in order to constitute and maintain its privilege (male, patriarchal, speaking, Latin, rational).

That a medieval allegory so closely mimics Kristeva's semiotic narrative may speak to the power and universality of her insight. It may as readily fuel Kristeva's detractors, who ultimately see her theory of the semiotic as a contemporary mysticism that serves to propagate deeply entrenched binaries through its reification of "maternal instinct," and thus reinforces women's exclusion from the symbolic. As Judith Butler (with Foucault) argues,

Insofar as Kristeva conceptualizes this maternal instinct as having an ontological status prior to the paternal law, she fails to consider the way in which that very law might well be the cause of the very desire it is said to *repress*. . . . The maternal body in its originary signification is considered by Kristeva to be prior to signification itself; hence, it becomes impossible within her framework to consider the maternal itself as a signification. Her argument makes clear that

maternal drives constitute those primary processes that language invariably represses or sublimates. But perhaps her argument could be recast within an even more encompassing framework: What cultural configuration of language, indeed, of *discourse*, generates the trope of a pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity, and for what purposes?<sup>44</sup>

The answer to Butler's apt query is long and complex, but I would suggest that Lady Grammar comprises an important episode in the history of that cultural discourse that constructs the nurturing female body as outsider, indeed that institutes sexual difference so that culture may have a buttressing "other."<sup>45</sup>

Lady Grammar furnishes a specific historical site of representation that at once articulated and interrogated the comfortable binary "pre-discursive female/discursive male." Inscribed upon the body of Lady Grammar, Nature and culture met to form a border. But the nurturing female body—fluid and unlined as it was—formed a rather too shifting ground for border inscription. It is as though two metaphorical traditions collided: the long-standing alignment of the female body with Nature, and the seemingly benign grammatical habit of allegorizing abstract concepts (gendered feminine in Latin) as female figures.<sup>46</sup>

The dramatic allegories of Lady Grammar that proliferated from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries were *performative* of gender in the way Butler describes:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.<sup>47</sup>

Those portraits of Lady Grammar with one breast emerging from under her cloak instituted an inside/outside binary that constructed the female body and primal desire as the internal core. The play of signifiers on the surface of Lady Grammar's body thus fabricated an identity for the official (male) speaking being. At the core of the speaking being lurked a dangerous corporeal energy, gendered female. It was the role of grammar to separate off and repress this energy. But Lady Grammar also subverted the very binaries she was meant to reify. Her bewildering gender status triggered parody in several of her late medieval portraitists.<sup>48</sup> She performed both "female" and "male" in a single body laden with signifiers and thus risked calling attention to gender divisions as cultural constructs invested with immense social power.<sup>49</sup>

I would like briefly to consider the ways in which the graceful vernacular prose of Dante's *Convivio*, which is roughly contemporaneous with the *De vulgari*

*eloquentia*, helps shed light on the implicit processes of the treatise's challenging Latin periods. In book 1, chapter 3, for instance, Dante comes right out and tells us that pre-exilic Florence is a nurturing mother, and that exile is a kind of mendicant wandering through the lands of a language whose grammatical unity, as we know, remains at best a hopeful presumption: "Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the most beautiful and famous daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out of her sweet bosom—where I was born and bred [nourished] up to the pinnacle of my life, and where, with her good will, I desire with all my heart to rest my weary mind and to complete the span of time that is given to me—I have wandered like a pilgrim, almost like a beggar, through virtually all the regions to which this tongue of ours extends."<sup>50</sup> We know from *Convivio* IV.xxiv.3 that the "pinnacle" of human life (colmo de la nostra vita) falls at the mathematical center of the life triptych, in the phase labeled "gioventute" or young manhood: nearly the historical age of exile, and clearly the ideal poetic age of exile, "nel mezzo del cammin." Between them, *Convivio* and *De vulgari* homologize a number of what we might call "exile events" both universal and individual: Babel, the Flood, the Fall from Grace, political exile, and grammar as loss of linguistic innocence. Motivating such homologies and underlying both texts is the generalized cultural notion of a primal scene of exile in the mother's body.

In *Convivio* IV.xxiv, Dante is not discussing grammar per se. We find him instead in the middle of a lengthy explication of book 4's canzone, "Le dolci rime d'amor ch'i' solia," one verse of which necessitates clarification of the human life stages. Dante identifies "adolescencia" (through age twenty-five) as the first real life phase, generally ignoring the traditional earlier divisions of infancy, teething, and boyhood. Nobility manifests itself differently at different periods of life. One noble quality appropriate to "adolescencia," he tells us, is obedience: obedience, that is to say, to one's father, one's grammar teachers and elders (maestri e maggiori), and whoever else might symbolically reside in the father's place (che loco paterno tiene). The adolescent must obey his fathers in order not to stray in the dangerous wood that is adult life.

Dante enlists Solomon and the first Proverb for authoritative support: "Hear, my son, the teaching of your father. . . . Do not let sinners have the power to beguile you with flatteries or delights so that you will go with them."<sup>51</sup> Comparison to the Vulgate proves instructive in revealing what Dante has omitted: "My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and do not forsake the law of thy mother." The following verse reads: "My son, if sinners shall entice thee, consent not to them."<sup>52</sup> Curious and telling is Jerome's choice of verb for sinful enticement, "lactare": spectacular semantic testimony to a profoundly rooted nurturing horror. For the rational *Convivio* philosopher (as for the *De vulgari* grammarian), it is as though a subtle contradiction inheres in Solomon's admonitions, which honor maternal law while metaphorically recalling sinful desire as originating in the mother's body. The *Convivio* philosopher wants his lines clean and straight, and he will have none of this ambiguity. He simply



omits all reference to the mother (as he will again a few lines below when citing Paul's advice to obey your parents, "parentibus," which in Dante becomes "obedite a li vostri padri," obey your fathers). The adolescent must leave behind childhood desires and submit to paternal discipline, just as earlier the infant had first seized upon but then turned away from the breast, as soon as the first glimmer of reason appeared: "So as a child clings to the mother's breast as soon as it is born, likewise as soon as some light appears in his mind he ought to turn to the correction of his father, and his father should give him instruction."<sup>53</sup> There is something physical and dangerous about the verb "appendersi." For the "stilnovisti," it connotes passion, a violent grabbing hold of, a catching fire.<sup>54</sup> It is the sort of desire that—for Dante the philosopher-grammarian—threatens reason.

At the same time, "appendere"<sup>55</sup> is commonplace (as well as the Latin "apprehendere"<sup>56</sup>) in Dante and elsewhere to denote a principle of intellect: to seize or lay hold of a concept, to learn. Reason and desire thus intermingle in the historical semantics of that verb. Finally, "appendersi" was also used in Dante's day as a literal reflexive: to lay hold or grab hold of oneself, as this verse from Jacopo da Lentini admirably illustrates: "Non è da blasmare / omo che cade in mare—se s'apprende."<sup>57</sup> I have suggested (with Kristeva's help) that Lady Grammar was fabricated as both desire and language, source of signification and its undoing, reason and the precondition of reason. Dante's vernacular phrase—perhaps in spite of itself—admits this difficult duality, and speaks to the originary imbrication of biological desire and semiosis. For all its blind desire, suckling is always already education and culture. The line between Nature and culture dissolves at the mother's breast, a place where the infant lays hold of its very self: indeed, "a la tetta de la madre s'apprende."

## Notes

1. For my reading of *De vulgari eloquentia* in particular, see ". . . quanquam Sarnum biberimus ante dentes . . . : The Primal Scene of Suckling in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*," *Dante Studies* CIX (1991): 119–47.
2. Medieval encyclopedists from Isidore to Bartholomeus Angelicus mark this moment with the appearance of teeth at around age two. See Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 21–31.
3. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25.
4. See, again, Cohen's own essay in *Monster Theory*, as well as Ruth Waterhouse, "Beowulf as Palimpsest," pp. 26–39; William Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Islanders," pp. 242–63; and Michael Uebel, "Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth-Century Responses to Saracen Alterity," pp. 264–91. For a general introduction to medieval monsters, see John B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

- University Press, 1981); see also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Limits of Knowing: Monsters and the Regulation of Medieval Popular Culture," *Medieval Folklore* 3 (Fall 1994): 1-37; for other aspects of the monstrous in medieval Italian literature, see, in this volume, the essays by Walter Stephens, Virginia Jewiss, and Naomi Yavneh.
5. See, for instance, the early twelfth-century manuscript of northern French provenance of the *De nuptiis* (S. Marco 190, Laurentian Library, Florence) discussed by Ludwig H. Heydenreich, "Eine illustrierte Martianus Capella-Handschrift des Mittelalters und ihre Kopien im Zeitalter des Frühhumanismus," in *Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Hans Kaufmann* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1956), pp. 59-66.
6. See, for instance, the parodic *grammaticus* of Eberhard the German, *Laborintus*, vv. 179-92, in *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Edmond Faral (Paris, 1924); or the *Grammatica* on Giovanni Pisano's pulpit pedestal (1302-10) in the cathedral at Pisa.
7. See, for instance, Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus* II.390-402; or the illustration from Bartolomeo di Bartoli da Bologna's "Canzone delle Virtù e delle Scienze" (1355), reproduced, most recently, by Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 38.
8. St. Augustine, *Confessions* I.ix-xiv, remains perhaps the classic account of grammatical terror; cp. the first panel of B. Gozzoli's 1465 fresco cycle on the life of the saint in the Church of St. Augustine in San Gimignano: Augustine's parents hand the stoic young saint over to the bearded, sinister, whip-bearing grammar masters.
9. For Kristeva's theory of the semiotic, see in particular *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For Kristeva's formulation of the semiotic as monstrous, see *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
10. Cp. Plato, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, trans. with a running commentary by Francis Macdonald Cornford (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1937).
11. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, pp. 28-29: "Drive facilitation, temporarily arrested, marks *discontinuities* in what may be called the various material supports susceptible to semiotization: voice, gesture, colors. Phonic (later phonemic), kinetic, or chromatic units and differences are the marks of these stases in the drives. Connections or *functions* are thereby established between these discrete marks which are based on drives and articulated according to their resemblance or opposition, either by slippage or by condensation. Here we find the principles of metonymy and metaphor indissociable from the drive economy underlying them."
12. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 28: "the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him."
13. See in particular the essays collected in *Desire in Language*.
14. See in particular *Powers of Horror*. For a recent reconsideration of Kristeva's terms, cp. Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York:

- Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 75–94; on the specific connection between women and monstrousness, see p. 81: “Julia Kristeva . . . connects this mixture [of simultaneous attraction and repulsion in the monstrous] to the maternal body as the site of the origin of life and consequently also of the insertion into mortality and death. We are all of woman born, and the mother’s body as the threshold of existence is both sacred and soiled, holy and hellish; it is attractive and repulsive, all-powerful and therefore impossible to live with.” I would like to thank Keala Jewell for calling this passage to my attention.
15. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), in particular pp. 79–93.
  16. See Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* III.iii; Quintilian, *Institutiones oratoriae* I.i.4–5; Jerome, Epistle cvii.
  17. See *Confessions* I.xiv.
  18. See *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, Book 3 and, in particular, paragraphs 221–28.
  19. *Metalogicon* I.xiii.840a; translation from *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).
  20. *Anticlaudianus* II.390–403; translation modified from *Anticlaudianus or The Good and Perfect Man*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973).
  21. “in dentium plantativa, qui lac sugit.” *Rhetorica novissima*, ed. Augusto Gaudenzi [= *Scripta Anecdota Glossatorum* II. *Bibliotheca Iuridica Medii Aevi* II] (Bologna: Treves, 1892), IX.v.
  22. “Iudicat enim de solis vocibus. Sustinet et defendit regulariter esse dictum ‘musca parit leonem’ et ‘angelus est cimera.’” See Boncompagno da Signa, *Rhetorica antiqua* or *Boncompagnus*, in L. Rockinger, *Briefsteller und Formelbücher des elften bis vierzehnten Jahrhunderts* [= *Quellen und Erörterungen zur bayerischen und deutschen Geschichte* IX] (Munich, 1863), p. 131; and V. Pini, *Testi riguardanti la vita degli studenti a Bologna nel sec. XIII* (Bologna, 1968), p. 12; all translations of Boncompagno are my own. On the figure of the chimera as cultural monster, see Ginevra Bompiani, “The Chimera Herself,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), 364–409. For a broader discussion of rhetoric’s disdain for grammar, see my “Dante, Boncompagno da Signa, Eberhard the German, and the Rhetoric of the Maternal Body,” in *The Rhetoric Canon*, ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 175–97.
  23. “. . . hyrcum annosum ubera capre sugentem,” *Boncompagnus*, 1.3.3.
  24. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 69; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 121.
  25. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 72.
  26. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 72.
  27. What follows represents a summary of the reading presented in my “Primal Scene.” Quotations of Dante’s treatise are from *De vulgari eloquentia. Opere Minori* II, ed. and trans. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (Milan: Ricciardi, 1979), pp. 3–237; English translations are from Marianne Shapiro, *De vulgari eloquentia: Dante’s Book of Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 47–89.
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28. As outlined above, this desire within the semiotic "chora" may be characterized initially as marking sensations of pleasure attached to arrest and facilitation of the drives, and eventually as the infant-not-yet-subject's desire for the mother-not-yet-object's breast; on the birth of language as desire for the breast, cp. Augustine, *Confessions* I.vi. For an explanation of subjectivity as founded on Lacan's polyvalent "désire de l'Autre," see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 49–68. For a reading of monsters in Vico as the embodiment of the poetry/reason or Nature/culture binary, see, in this volume, the essay by Massimo Riva and, for a comparison, the essay by Barbara Spackman.
29. *De vulgari* I.ix.11.
30. *De vulgari* I.i.3: "locutionem . . . qua infantes assuefunt ab assistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt."
31. *De vulgari* I.i.3: "vel, quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus."
32. *De vulgari* I.vi.1: "vir sine matre, vir sine lacte."
33. *De vulgari* I.xviii.1.
34. *De vulgari* II.vii.2: "mamma et babbo."
35. *De vulgari* II.vii.2: "lubrica vero et reburra vocamus illa que in superfluum sonant."
36. Cohen, *Monster Theory*, pp. 12–16: "Thesis V: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible." Lady Grammar provides an interesting and perhaps exemplary test case for all of Cohen's theses.
37. For one reading of grammar's social function, see Walter J. Ong, "Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite," in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 113–41. See also: Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
38. For a close study of grammar as a discipline that imparted moral imperatives along with vocabulary and syntax, see Paul F. Gehl, *A Moral Art: Grammar, Society, and Culture in Trecento Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).
39. Every reader of the *De vulgari eloquentia* knows of the intimate relation between national and linguistic boundaries. On Dante's competitive urge to assert the presence of a supra-regional Italian language in the *De vulgari* over and against French and Provençal, see Zygmunt G. Baranski, "'Significar per verba': Dante and Plurilingualism," *The Italianist* vol. 6 (1986), pp. 5–18 and in particular pp. 14–15.
40. Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 12.
41. For a reading of Circe and Caeta as monstrous bodies in *Inferno* XXVI, see my forthcoming book.
42. Cohen, *Monster Theory*, pp. 16–20: "Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire."
43. In this light, compare Lady Grammar to the representations of grammar as male—either the paternal "magister," or Donatus, or Priscian—that began to replace her in the fourteenth century and through the Renaissance. See for instance the bas-relief made for Giotto's campanile by Luca Della Robbia, now in the Museo

- dell'Opera del Duomo. As "pure culture" with no reality beyond representation, Lady Grammar would harbor greater monstrous potential in Cohen's view; see Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 21, n.6.
44. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 90–91.
45. It is by no means apparent that Kristeva fails to recognize the semiotic body as a discursive construct. At times her writings seem to endorse a kind of biological determinism (not to mention homophobia). She nonetheless consistently defines the semiotic as working both within and against the symbolic, as something defined through the symbolic. Butler would have her clarify that the notion of a semiotic outside is one with the culture that would exclude it. Butler concedes that, "in no way do these criticisms of Kristeva's conception of the paternal law necessarily invalidate her general position that culture or the Symbolic is predicated upon a repudiation of women's bodies. I want to suggest, however, that any theory that asserts that signification is predicated upon the denial or repression of a female principle ought to consider whether that femaleness is really external to the cultural norms by which it is repressed" (*Gender Trouble*, p. 93). Butler would have us "cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself" (*Gender Trouble*, p. 93). It seems to me that this is precisely what Kristeva had in mind for the revolutionary poetic language of the semiotic. For a reasoned reassessment and, in many ways, defense of Kristeva that has influenced my understanding, see Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); see also *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993).
46. But while it is true that all of the liberal arts were allegorized as females, none exhibited the problematic characteristics of female corporeality like Grammatica. There was an earlier tradition that allegorized Sapientia as a nursing mother who furnished the milk of wisdom to her seven daughters, the Arts; see M-T. D'Alverny, "La Sagesse et Ses Sept Filles," *Mélanges Dédiés à la Mémoire de Félix Grat*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1946), pp. 245–78. On his pulpit pedestal (1302–10) in the cathedral at Pisa, Giovanni Pisano rendered both a nursing Ecclesia and Grammatica. Interestingly, the Virgin began to nurse with one bare breast in early fourteenth-century Italy; see Margaret Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture," in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). For a recent survey of suckling imagery throughout the history of Western culture, see Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Knopf, 1997). While Yalom's discussion of breast imagery in medieval and early Renaissance Italy (see in particular pp. 32–48) is somewhat sparse, she touches on a number of important historical hypotheses to explain the renewed interest in breast imagery in Dante's Italy. Please note, however, that the image of the nurse-cum-whip that she reproduces on p. 38, and identifies simply as "a mother," is indeed Lady Grammar.
47. *Gender Trouble*, p. 136.
48. The sense of play evident, for instance, in Alan of Lille stems from the paradox of a being that is both "mother and father"; several other twelfth-century allegorists play on the nurturing mother/punishing father dualism (Godefroi de Breteuil, Adalard

- of Bath). In Eberhard the German and then Boncompagno da Signa, the sight of an adult male still dependant on mother's milk makes for humorous self-loathing (in the first case) and ridicule (in the second).
49. She was, in this sense, a drag queen. On drag as the performative subversion of gender binaries, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 134–49; and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 20, emphasizes that culture creates monsters that, in turn, confront culture with questions about its basic beliefs: "Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming." "Monsters are our children. . . . They ask us why we have created them."
  50. *Convivio*, ed. G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1954), I.iii.3–4. Translations from Dante's *Il Convivio* (*The Banquet*), trans. Richard H. Lansing (New York: Garland, 1990): "Poi che fu piacere de li cittadini de la bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma, Fiorenza, di gittarmi fuori del suo dolce seno—nel quale nato e nutrito fui in fino al colmo de la vita mia, e nel quale, con buona pace di quella, desidero con tutto lo cuore di riposare l'animo stancato e terminare lo tempo che m'è dato—per le parti quasi tutte a le quali questa lingua si stende, peregrino, quasi mendicando, sono andato."
  51. *Convivio* IV.xxiv.14: "Audi, figlio mio, l'ammaestramento del tuo padre. . . . Non ti possano quello fare di lusinghe nè di diletto li peccatori, che tu vadi con loro."
  52. Proverbs 1:8–10: "Audi, fili mi, disciplinam patris tui et ne dimittas legem matris tuae. . . . Fili mi, si te lactaverint peccatores, ne adquirescas eis." English translations are from the Douay version of the Vulgate (New York: C. Wildermann, 1911).
  53. *Convivio* IV.xxiv.14: "Onde, sì come, nato, tosto lo figlio a la tetta de la madre s'apprende, così tosto, come alcuno lume d'animo in esso appare, si dee volgere a la correzione del padre, e lo padre lui ammaestrare."
  54. Guido Guinizelli: "Foco d'amor 'n gentil cor s'apprende" (Fire takes hold in the gentle heart) cited by Battaglia s.v. "apprendere" (see following note); and Dante in *Inferno* V.100–101: "Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende / prese costui della bella persona" (Love, which is quickly kindled in a gentle heart, siezed this one for the fair form), where "s'apprende" is in end rhyme with "discende" and "m'offende." *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).
  55. For an initial survey of acceptations, see Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario Della Lingua Italiana* (Turin: UTET, 1961), s.v. "apprendere."
  56. See DuCange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, ed. L. Favre (Niort, 1885), vol. I, s.v. "apprehendere."
  57. Cited by Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario*, s.v. "apprendersi" in acceptation 10 (ap-pigliarsi, aggrapparsi, afferrarsi, attaccarsi), along with *Convivio* IV.xxiv.4.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Incredible Sex: Witches, Demons, and Giants in the Early Modern Imagination*

WALTER STEPHENS



In his dialogue *The Messenger* (*Il messaggiero*, 1580–87), Torquato Tasso writes that he awoke one morning to find a marvelous, luminous presence in his prison cell at the Ospedale di Sant’Anna. Questioning his suprahuman visitor, “Torquato” was led into a lengthy discussion about the existence and nature of creatures intermediate between humans and God.<sup>1</sup> Torquato had been uncomfortably skeptical about the existence of angels and demons, but he claims that the “Messenger” provided such varied and cogent evidence that he finally overcame his previous doubt about the world of spirits. However, such conviction was not easily won, and Torquato’s responses indicate that some of the Messenger’s proofs hardly commanded instant assent.

Già avendo io altre fiate udito dire che i demoni de le femine s’innamoravano e godevano de’ loro amorosi abbracciamenti, non dava maggior credenza a cotali parole ch’io soglia dar a quel che favoleggiano le vecchiarelle co’ fanciulli, quando a la lor conocchia traggono la chioma. Ma ora, intendendo da te come tu provi che essi siano soggetti a le amorose passioni, non mi pare sconvenevole; e, ricordandomi quel che de’ giganti lessi ne le sacre lettere e quel che de gli eroi ne le gentili ho letto, mi confermo in questo opinione. Mi par nondimeno cosa assai maravigliosa che di due spezie di natura diverse, quali sono la umana e quella de’ demoni, possa nascere un misto che sia gigante o eroe.<sup>2</sup>

(Having heard tell on other occasions that spirits became enamored of women and enjoyed their loving embraces, I gave no more

credence to such words than I normally give to the fables that old women tell to children while they wind wool onto their spindles. But now, having heard how you prove that spirits are subject to erotic passion, it no longer seems implausible to me. And remembering what I once read in the Scriptures about Giants, and what I have read in pagan literature about Heroes, I find it even more plausible. Nevertheless, it seems quite wonderful to me that two species as diverse from each other as are spirits and humans can give birth to a hybrid, whether Giant or Hero.<sup>3</sup>)

The assumptions behind this passage are of the utmost importance to the mythology of witches and witchcraft in early modern culture. In fact, Tasso is referring to witches, and “witch” was the name learned males of his time most often gave to women who supposedly had sex with suprahuman beings. The idea that witches copulated with demons was characteristic of scholarly fantasies about witchcraft, while it was foreign to the oral imagination of the illiterate village and countryside. Peasants agreed that witches worked the harmful magic that learned males called “maleficium,” but peasants did not believe that witches received this power from demons.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, theorists of witchcraft were often relatively uninterested in “maleficia” as sins or crimes; instead, they construed the putative evil deeds of witches as *prima facie* proof that some women were evil enough to have contact with demons.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, witchcraft theory represented the forcible imposition of literate ideas about spirituality and corporeality over a popular culture where such ideas were inchoate or nonexistent.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike his witchcraft theory, Tasso’s presentation of the Giants is somewhat peculiar. Most medieval and Renaissance writers concentrated on the deeds of Giants, who were supposed to be irredeemably evil; but shortly before the time of Rabelais, some scholars suddenly declared that Giants had been predominantly “good.”<sup>7</sup> Indifferent to these moral stereotypes, Tasso is exclusively interested in the genetic status of Giants; hence he groups them with Heroes as hybrids. The genetic question is fundamental: the Messenger reminds Torquato that hybrids born of humans and spirits are in principle no more exotic than mules and certain kinds of dogs. In fact, the dialogue altogether naturalizes the concept of the monster, depriving it of any significance beyond that of hybridity:

—Meno inusitata ti parrà,—rispose lo spirito—se ti ridurrai a memoria che dal cavallo e da l’asina nasce il mulo, e nel paese di Cirene i cani nascono da’ lupi e da le cagne; e i cani laconici da’ cani e da le volpi, e gli indiani da le tigri e da’ cani, ma nel terzo congiungimento, e che ne la riva d’un fiume d’Africa dal rimescolamento di vari animali son prodotti ogni giorno molti mostri: nondimeno puoi di ciò credere al tuo modo. Ma sappi che il





The devil carrying a naked witch to Hell in fulfilment of her pact with him, from Olaus Magnus's *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (Rome, 1555). Tasso's copy of this book, with his annotations, is extant (see Tasso, *Dialoghi*, edited by Basile, 53n). Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library of the Johns Hopkins University.

corpo de' demoni non è grosso e terreno come quello de gli uomini, ma etereo e sottile. (*Dialoghi* [ed. Mazzali], pp. 49–50)

(“It will seem less unusual to you [that spirits and humans can procreate together],” answered the spirit, “if you will recall that the mule is born from a horse and a donkey, and that in the countryside of Cyrene dogs are born from wolves and bitches, and Spartan dogs from wolves and foxes, and Indian dogs from tigresses and dogs (though only at the third mating), and that on the banks of a river in Africa many monsters are born every day from the interbreeding of various animals. Nonetheless, you can believe what you like about all this. But you must know that the body of daemons is not gross and earthly like that of humans, but ethereal and subtle.”<sup>8</sup>)

The relative naturalness and moral neutrality of Tasso's Giants extends even to their mothers. While by no means presenting witches positively, Tasso seems uninterested in their misdeeds; he does not distinguish between the actual crimes of witches and those of other magicians, and the most he has to say about magical crimes in general is that if they did not exist, there would be no point in making laws against magicians and witches.<sup>9</sup> Tasso's general disinterest in witches' crimes appears in his distinction between witches (*streghe*) and female magicians (*maghe*): while witches actually have sex with spirits, “maghe” only believe they do.<sup>10</sup>

Tasso's misogyny is expressed obliquely, rather than through any moral or religious condemnation of witches. He represents the problem of witchcraft as a clash of cultures that takes place through the production of narrative, describing old women as the transmitters of a popular narrative culture preserved in *fiabe* or fairy tales. Because they lack all verisimilitude, these narratives are appropriate only for children. Conversely, Tasso represents literary culture, which is implicitly male in both production and consumption, as inherently and unproblematically credible, whether its ideology be Christian or pagan. Thus religious orientation is ostensibly not at issue, whereas the gendered context of narrative is ostensibly the only variable that matters. At a third level, however, the "credible" culture of male literacy is invoked to guarantee the believability of *certain* narratives that show all the formal features of "old wives' tales." The Messenger has provided philosophical and scientific proof (*tu provi*) that these narratives are worthy of belief, but Torquato implies that without the further corroboration of biblical and classical narrative authority, he still would not have believed such tales.

When Torquato compares witchcraft narratives to tales "old wives" told children while spinning, he implies he had formerly shared the skepticism of scholars like Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot, who dismissed witchcraft—both "maleficia" and demonic copulation—as the ravings of senile or diseased women.<sup>11</sup> With a misogyny that now seems paradoxical, these would-be defenders of women's innocence largely overlooked the role of torture in obtaining confessions. We now know that such narratives were never told independently of physical or psychological torture, and that they were constructed dialogically through defendants' responses to standardized leading questions collected in formularies, or handbooks of interrogation.<sup>12</sup> Yet early modern defenders of women asserted that inquisitors and judges were gullible, and thus women were blamed by their defenders for the judges' erroneous belief (or rather, desire to believe) in witchcraft. The notion that women and demons could have sex supposedly arose in a perverted female imagination, which was corrupted in one of two ways: either by women's more volatile physical constitution, which could induce hallucinations, or by their lasciviousness, which was supposed to be inherently far more intense than men's.<sup>13</sup> Tasso's *Messaggiero* differs from such ambiguous "defenses" of women by never explicitly claiming that stories of demonic copulation originate in the popular culture of women; instead, it leaves the inference to be made. However, the inference is contradicted by the Messenger's lengthy and detailed explanations of demonic corporeality and sexuality; these derive exclusively from highly specialized sources in literate culture. *Il messaggiero* ironically and perhaps unwittingly reflects the fact that in Tasso's time, stories of sexual intercourse between women and spirits were cultivated more assiduously by theorists of witchcraft and hunters of witches than by any other group.

The encounter between witchcraft theorists and women engendered a double paradox. In the literate culture shared by both proponents and opponents

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of witch-hunting, the narratives of old women were generally held up to ridicule. Yet the declared foes of old women insisted that one genre of “old wives’ tale” was supremely truthful, while defenders of women dismissed these tales as yet another example of female imbecility. Tasso’s dialogue exhibits paradoxes that are even more intriguing. In the first place, it implies that old women tell tales of demonic copulation without being tortured; then it invokes the Bible and the classics to demonstrate that not everything recounted by old women is foolish and incredible. The inference is that old women’s narratives should be judged incredible *except* when they show features shared by the classical and biblical narratives that literate males cultivated. Thus Tasso implies that literate male culture merely guarantees the veracity of “old wives’ tales” about demonic copulation and conception. This is not the same paradox that fascinates modern scholars about witchcraft theory, i.e., that literate men should reevaluate the popular culture of women and defend some of its elements so as to oppress women further.

The paradox is that while Torquato explicitly invokes classical and biblical literature to validate tales of demonic copulation attributed to witches, a counterlogic within the dialogue enlists the putative feminine narratives to defend the credibility of biblical and classical narratives about hybridization between human and suprahuman beings. In the context of the dialogue as a whole, the issue of credibility does not primarily regard the culture of old women, but rather that of literate males: Can we believe that there are beings—Giants and Heroes—who have a suprahuman parent? And, by extension, can we believe that such suprahuman parents can be located and verified *as* suprahuman? “Confessional” tales attributed to accused witches serve the same purpose as the numerous pages of philosophical, theological, and scientific proofs: they validate classical and biblical lore about Heroes and Giants by corroborating the notion that intimate contact between human and suprahuman beings is possible. Thus Tasso’s argument depends on two reversals. First, the corroborating proof and the desired conclusion switch places; then the fairy tales of old women are invoked as negative corroboration. Tasso can assert that tales of demonic copulation are plausible and credible both because they have biblical and classical analogues and because women tell other kinds of “old wives’ tales” that show even less respect for the mundane realities of everyday life.

I have argued elsewhere that witches are the unapparent ideological center of *Il messaggiero*.<sup>14</sup> The dialogue is a carefully constructed demonological summa, the point of which is to demonstrate that the world of angels, demons, and the human soul is not imaginary, and that real contact with the suprahuman is possible. However, none of the proofs the Messenger offers Torquato fully convinces him, until he mentions witches. When the Messenger explains how such women copulate with demons and procreate hybrid offspring—the Giants—Torquato declares himself satisfied: “Here the spirit fell silent; and I, as if all my doubts had been resolved, had nothing else to ask” (*Taceva lo spirito; e io, quasi sodisfatto d’ogni mio dubbio, non aveva che dimandare*).<sup>15</sup>

There is abundant evidence that Tasso was involuntarily skeptical about the reality of the spirit world described by Christianity, and that he felt an urgent need to reinforce the credibility of Christian ontology and cosmology. Thus he constructed in the *Messaggiero* a Neoplatonic cosmology and ontology that was virtually identical to the orthodox Christian one but demonstrated greater philosophical rigor and more congruence with the picture of reality provided by sixteenth-century science. Yet even Neoplatonic philosophy offered no reliable way of demonstrating that spirits are real. Hence Tasso's compulsion to demonstrate the reality of demonic copulation. If humans can successfully mate with demonstrably suprahuman beings, then the hybrid offspring produced by such unions demonstrate that there is an unbroken chain of being that stretches from humanity to God. Angels, demons, and daemons (a Neoplatonic variant) fill the ontological gap between humans and God and serve as messengers and relays; otherwise, the profound differences between God and humanity would make communication impossible.

In Tasso's day, these apparently bizarre concerns were not limited to madmen and melancholics; they also obsessed the powerful and the nominally sane. *Il messaggiero* resembles treatises of witchcraft theory like *Malleus maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches) for reasons that are substantial, because Tasso's involuntary doubt about the truth of Christianity also plagued witchcraft theorists and defenders of witch-hunting.<sup>16</sup> Like Tasso's fictive self Torquato, witchcraft theorists could find no more convincing proof of the existence of suprahuman, spiritual creatures than the sexuality of women. If spirits can have sexual intercourse with women, and if those women can testify to the reality of that intercourse—either by describing it convincingly or, better yet, by producing children with manifestly suprahuman or nonhuman characteristics—then spirits must exist, whether anxious male intellectuals encounter them in everyday life or not.<sup>17</sup> Already in 1487 Heinrich Kramer (alias Institoris), author of the *Malleus maleficarum*, had categorically declared that all witches practice “carnal copulation with demons.” Furthermore, he declared, the witches’ assurance that they have actual carnal union with demons proves that demons are real. “The theory that modern witches are tainted with this sort of diabolic filthiness does not depend so much on our own opinion, as on *the expert testimony of the witches themselves, which has made all these things credible*.”<sup>18</sup> The witch defendants are invoked by Kramer as expert witnesses, but not to the reality of their own crimes. Those “maleficia” are attested by the witness of others and merely ratified by the witches’ confession. Instead, witches are expert *witnesses* to the reality of the crime of demonic copulation. The Dominican inquisitor Silvestro Mazzolini (alias Prierias) also understood that demonic copulation was a potential guarantee of spiritual reality; he wrote in 1521 that “the second effect of witchcraft is sexual union . . . with incubi and succubi, according to the gender of the witch. This effect is so miraculous that a person can have either active or passive coitus with a spirit; and *this coitus is so real* that from it are born not ordinary men, but rather Giants, as all theologians are agreed.”<sup>19</sup> Mazzolini’s

insistence that demonic copulation is both miraculous and real belongs to the mainstream of continental European witch mythology. Yet his assertion that males also knowingly practice demonic copulation was a minority opinion, for reasons that we will investigate.

Like Mazzolini, his pupil Bartolomeo Spina was unable to avoid betraying the anxieties and insecurities that made witches necessary to his system of would-be beliefs. Spina is better known for his vehement attacks on Pietro Pomponazzi, the philosopher who had asserted in his *De immortalitate animae* (On the Immortality of the Soul) that the philosophy of Aristotle could not be used to demonstrate human immortality, as Scholastic philosophers like Mazzolini and Spina wished to believe.<sup>20</sup> Spina's need to believe in witches derived from the same anxious doubts about the reality of spirit that drove his refutation of Pomponazzi.

[Through witchcraft] we come to know three things by familiar experience, three things we formerly knew only by faith (although they are still questioned by those who wish to measure everything by their own intellect). First, that in our own regions intellectual creatures can be observed, whom we call demons, who have infinitely more power and knowledge than humans. Second, because the work of witchcraft is evil, we know demons to be evil. We can almost feel with our hands how demons seduce men and women into innumerable crimes, deceptions, and frauds. Thirdly, we come to know with what ferocious hatred demons persecute Our Lord Jesus Christ and those devoted to Him; how they inflict various injuries, above all on the innocent; how they persecute the faith of Christ, and by every possible means expose the sacraments of the Church to contempt, mockery, and disgrace, so that they are dishonored.<sup>21</sup>

Here the witchcraft theorist, who rhetorically presents himself as the man of unbounded faith, admits that his faith has need of empirical corroboration. He further indicates that the "maleficia" or crimes of witches interest him above all for what they imply about the existence and evil disposition of certain spirits. This proof only seems nonsensical or otiose if we presume that witchcraft theorists already believed the conclusions of their immense proofs, and were merely attempting to convince others. Instead, Spina shows that the whole foundation of Catholicism was susceptible to seeming unreal, even to its most dedicated defenders.<sup>22</sup> Unless invisible saboteurs are at work, Spina reasons, then the innocent really do suffer unjustly, and thus men are justified in their contempt for the sacraments of the Church. If such invisible saboteurs do not exist, the sacraments could actually be imaginary.<sup>23</sup> But precisely because the demonic saboteurs are invisible, they cannot be located unless they have visible accomplices who can give credible evidence of their existence. And that is the definition of the witch, as originally formulated by Kramer in the *Malleus*:



Witches giving the *osculum infame*, or obscene kiss, to Satan at the Sabbat, from Francesco Maria Guazzo's *Compendium maleficarum* (Milan, 1626). George Peabody Library of the Johns Hopkins University.

an *expert witness* to the reality of demons and to demonic sabotage of God's providential plan for human prosperity and happiness.

The ideological stakes for proving that witches and demons copulated were thus exorbitantly high. However, as Torquato indicates to the Messenger, that copulation is problematic for two reasons: first, because of the manner in which it supposedly happens, and second, because of the nature of the hybrid offspring it supposedly produces.

Tasso has the Messenger describe the *modus operandi* of demonic copulation in terms that are deceptively simple and unproblematic, in order to make demonic copulation “virisimilar” and therefore verisimilar. Certain demons, he says, “copulate with women in the same fashion that you men do. And because they could never sire anything on their own, they inject the semen of some man into the womb of one of those women whom you humans call witches.”<sup>24</sup> This nonchalance about the “manner” of demonic coitus already conceals two major difficulties. First, the reason why demons cannot sire anything on their own (*per se*) is that, by definition, they have no bodies and, consequently, no gender. Thus, they not only cannot fecundate a woman on their own, they cannot even penetrate her or—perhaps—even convince her of their presence. Secondly, even if we grant (as we must perforce) that demons therefore make use of some sort

of artificial or factitious body in order to have sex with women, such a body cannot produce real and viable semen, since it is by definition outside of Nature. Thus, we will have to identify a source of real and viable semen, and explain how demons can obtain it, protect its viability, and then introduce it into the body of a witch.

The solution to these difficulties was elaborated by Scholastic philosophers, most notably Thomas Aquinas: in order to interact corporeally with humans, a demon must first fabricate a body from inspissated (compressed) air and vapors. If the demon wishes to impregnate a woman, it must give its assumed body a feminine gender, becoming a succubus; then it must have sex with a human male and collect his sperm. Afterward, the devil transports the semen to the bedside of a witch, taking care to preserve its vital heat; there the artificial body is transgendered, becoming an incubus, has sex with the witch, and deposits the sperm in her womb.<sup>25</sup> This exquisite logic conceals several gendered paradoxes, however. If procreation is to take place, a demon must be feminized as a "succubus" before a woman can be "demonized" for copulating with an incubus. Further, this process presumes that a man, who usually remains unpunished, must have sex with a succubus before a woman can be criminalized for having sex with an incubus. This is because only the procreation of an abnormal child is adequate proof—assuming any proof is adequate—that the encounter and copulation between woman and demon were real. Thus, while some witchcraft theorists claimed that men knowingly had sex with succubi, most seem to have assumed that the men would "innocently" believe they had had a nocturnal emission during a very erotic dream. Still, the question is complicated, because witchcraft theorists often seem too embarrassed by the implications for male sexuality to explain the full process in any detail.

In Kramer's *Malleus maleficarum*, we see most vividly how the construct of demonic sex functioned to guarantee the reality of demons. As I have observed elsewhere, the purpose of the first chapter of Kramer's work is simply to prove that demons *are not imaginary* by proving that witchcraft, or intimate voluntary contact with demons, is not imaginary.<sup>26</sup> But it is in his answers to hypothetical objections about demonic sexuality that Kramer most obsessively betrays the scant credibility that demons have for him. Above all, he is concerned to counter skepticism about the possibility of bodily contact with demons: "In the first place we may consider the act of generation. But for every act which has an effect upon another some kind of contact must be established, and . . . the devil, who is a spirit, can have no such actual contact with a human body, since there is nothing common of this kind between them." The problem returns more worrisomely a few pages later: "every action is performed by contact, and especially the act of generation. But it does not seem possible that there can be any contact between the demon and human bodies, since he has no actual point of contact with them. Therefore he cannot inject semen into a human body, and therefore since this needs a certain bodily action, it would seem that the devil cannot accomplish it."<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, all the various problems concerning the mechanics and modalities of demonic sex were worked out, although the final construct has all the improbable machinery of a Rube Goldberg cartoon—or the Ptolemaic universe in its twilight.<sup>28</sup> In *Malleus maleficarum*, the primary descriptions of demonic copulation occupy three large chapters, not to mention the incidental disquisitions given in other chapters. Nor is it accidental that the third chapter of the first part, preceded only by the formal definitions of witchcraft and witches, is already devoted to demonic copulation rather than to harmful magic.<sup>29</sup>

The second great problem with demonic copulation was the nature of the offspring it produced. We saw that Silvestro Mazzolini asserted that “all theologians are agreed” that copulation between women and demons produces Giants, and that Tasso alluded favorably to this idea in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay. Ancient traditions recorded in Genesis 6 appeared indeed to assert that Giants had been a hybrid race born from the copulation of women and angels.

Cumque coeppissent homines multiplicari super terram, et filias procreassent, videntes filii Dei filias hominum quod essent pulchrae, acceperunt sibi uxores ex omnibus, quas elegerant. Dixitque Deus: Non permanebit spiritus meus in homine in aeternum, quia caro est: eruntque dies illius centum viginti annorum. Gigantes autem erant super terram in diebus illis: postquam enim ingressi sunt filii Dei ad filias hominum, illaeque genuerunt, isti sunt potentes a saeculo viri famosi.

(And after that men began to be multiplied upon the earth, and daughters were born to them, the Sons of God seeing the daughters of men, that they were fair, took to themselves wives, of all which they chose. And God said: “My spirit shall not remain in man for ever, because he is flesh: and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.” Now Giants were upon the earth in those days. For after the Sons of God went in to the daughters of men and they brought forth children; these are the mighty men of old, men of renown.)<sup>30</sup>

These cryptic verses imply that the crime of the sons of God and the daughters of men was responsible both for God’s decision to destroy the world in Noah’s Flood and for the birth of the Giants. Many Christian authors thus concluded that Giants had been a race of beings who were thoroughly evil, and attributed their perverted nature to this act of radical miscegenation.

To refer to “radical miscegenation” is, however, to elide the complexity of the historical, ontological, and theological problems that these four verses presented to Christian thinkers until after 1900. Although the biblical verses seem to imply that Giants were the offspring of human mothers and angelic fathers, the majority of Christian commentators were unable to accept this reading:



from the fourth century onward, most Latin Christians spurned these “fables” (as Saint Augustine called them) and insisted that the fathers of the Giants were necessarily mortal men. Augustine asserted that spiritual and carnal beings cannot have sexual congress with each other, but he also rejected the angels theory because it implies a second fall of the angels long after the fall of Adam. Hence, in a fashion reminiscent of Gnosticism or Manichaeism, it attributes an objectively suprahuman origin to most evils of the antediluvian world, rather than stressing the primacy of the human will. (Stephens, *Giants*, p. 78)

Because of these problems, a purely human version of the origin of the Giants was sought and eventually found: the “Sons of God” were interpreted as the descendants of Adam’s third son Seth, while the “daughters of men” were identified as female descendants of Cain. Although it still seemed to make evil dependent on heredity rather than free will, this interpretation became all but universal between the time of Augustine and that of Aquinas.<sup>31</sup> Mazzolini’s assertion that “all theologians are agreed” that Giants are the hybrid offspring of witches and demons is thus a considerable misrepresentation.

Heinrich Kramer had been unable to dissimulate his awareness of opposing the long-standing theological agreement about the origin of the Giants:

In conclusion, in spite of the contention of some that devils in bodily shape can in no way generate children, and that by the “sons of God” is meant the sons of Seth and not Incubi devils, just as by the “daughters of men” is meant the descendants of Cain, nevertheless the contrary is clearly affirmed by many. And that which seems true to many cannot be altogether false, according to Aristotle in his 6th *Ethics* and at the end of the *de Somno et Vigilia*. And now also in modern times we have the well-attested deeds and words of witches who truly and actually perform such things. [Kramer, *Malleus*, p. 27, fol. 13v]

Aquinas himself was not above a bit of legerdemain to preserve the reality of demonic copulation:

it is better to take “sons of God” as referring to the sons of Seth, who were a good stock, and whom Scripture distinguishes from the stock of Cain by calling the latter “sons of men.” . . . But let us suppose that occasionally an offspring is born from copulation with a devil. In such a case the semen would not come from the devil himself, properly speaking, nor from the body he had assumed; it would be taken from a man for that purpose; and the same devil would receive semen from a man and impart it to a woman. (Augustine, in *De Trinitate*, speaks of devils using non-human seed in this way.) And the child so begotten would not have the devil for its father, but

the man whose semen had been used. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, p. 43)

Aquinas thus incidentally and probably unwillingly reintroduced the notion that fallen angels had sired the Giants. More importantly, it was witchcraft theorists who set out to verify their interpretation of Thomas by identifying real, live paramours of demons. They clearly did so in order to corroborate their other “evidence” that demons were capable of demonstrating their existence to a skeptical audience of philosophers and scientists. These writers’ reasoning is almost perfectly circular: we must believe that demons are real because they can sire real children; we know that they can do this both because our preferred interpretation of Scripture maintains that they can, and because witches also maintain on the basis of their own experience that such things are possible. Thus the testimony of witches and Scripture is mutually corroborative.

Given the history of biblical commentary in the Latin West, when Tasso refers to the Giants as offspring of “Sons of God” who were angels rather than human beings, he aligns himself with a minority opinion, reintroduced, after centuries of discredit, solely to prove the possibility of intimate contact between humans and demons. But even more strangely, this reference makes *Il messaggero* contradict itself: fifteen pages before Torquato mentions the scriptural Giants as offspring of demonic copulation, the Messenger has already made clear that the “filii Dei” of Genesis 6 were *not* fallen angels. In this earlier passage, Torquato has mentioned classical Heroes as the offspring of women and gods, and he has observed that “many will concede the existence of gods” (since pagan gods were merely demons, according to standard Christian interpretations). But, Torquato warns, such people “will deny that gods may copulate with women” (*molte concederan che gli dei siano, i quali negheranno che gli dei possano con le donne mescolarsi*).

Qui sospirò lo spirito, e rispose: —Cotesto ad alcuni è stato persuaso, perché avevano letto ne le sacre lettere ch’i giganti son figliuoli de gli angeli e de le donne; ma sì come quegli angeli furono uomini, così uomini furono gli dei de’ gentili, la geneologia [*sic*] de’ quali fu descritta da Esiodo e dal vostro Boccaccio. (*Dialoghi* [ed. Mazzali], p. 34)

(Here the spirit sighed, and answered: “Many have believed this because they had read in Holy Scripture that the Giants are sons of angels and women; but just as those angels were actually men, so the gods of the pagans were also men, whose genealogy was traced by Hesiod and by your Boccaccio.”)

Thus the Messenger explains the biblical passage in purely human terms by invoking the euhemeristic explanation of pagan gods as ancient kings and inventors.<sup>32</sup> This kind of move was anathema to defenders of witch-hunting. Because they were ideologically invested in increasing the evidence of supra-

human intervention rather than decreasing it, every reference to polytheism and idolatry required a demonological explanation. To accept any euhemeristic—that is, humanistic—interpretation was the first step toward admitting that the whole supernatural system might be based on human imagination rather than reality.

While Tasso's self-contradiction is blatant, it admits a simple explanation. He worked on *Il messaggiero* over the course of seven years, in at least three phases.<sup>33</sup> In the earliest redaction of the dialogue, there is no trace of euhemerism because, rather than correcting Torquato, the Messenger enthusiastically espouses the theory that the Giants were sired by angels.

Qui sospirò lo spirito in guisa che parve ch'egli d'amoroso desiderio sfavillasse, e sospirando rispose:—Cotesto non ti dovrebbe parere strano, avendo tu letto nelle vostre sacre lettere ch'i giganti furono figliuoli delle donne e degli angeli. Ma rimettendo questo dubbio al suo luogo, io passerò alla seconda prova.<sup>34</sup>

(Here the spirit sighed in such a way that he seemed to shed sparks of amorous desire, and he answered while sighing: "This should not seem strange to you, since you have read in your Holy Scriptures that the Giants were the sons of women and angels. However, putting off this argument until its proper place, I shall pass to my second proof.")

In the earlier redaction, the Messenger's scintillation even seems to provide a visual demonstration of the erotic fascination that daemonic creatures can feel for humans.<sup>35</sup> Tasso apparently came to understand that the demonological interpretation of Genesis 6 was heterodox and edited it out of this passage, but he also apparently forgot either to eliminate Torquato's subsequent endorsement of the heterodox theory, or to have the Messenger correct him anew. Given that there are several other lapses in editing between the first and definitive redactions of *Il messaggiero*, no other explanation seems likely.<sup>36</sup>

There is one final element to the muddle that Tasso inherited from witchcraft theorists' and others' commentary on the biblical passage. Having given contradictory accounts of Giants as the offspring of human mothers and suprahuman fathers, Tasso then appears entirely to forget the Giants and the biblical story in which they appear. He has the Messenger provide one more historical proof that women can have fully corporeal intercourse with certain kinds of spirits, but this time the child born is neither biblical nor classical but Arthurian: "and from such copulation are born maguses, such as Merlin, who was thought to be the son of the Devil" (e da sì fatti congiungimenti nascono i maghi, quale fu Merlino, che fu giudicato figliuolo del demonio; *Dialoghi* [ed. Mazzali], pp. 55–56). We have seen that between the first and final redactions of *Il messaggiero*, Tasso realized he had espoused a heterodox origin for the Giants; thus the same care to avoid heterodoxy could have inspired him to substitute Merlin for the Giants. Yet the textual tradition of *Il messaggiero* makes clear

that the substitution of Merlin for the Giants was made in the earliest stages of composition, not as an afterthought. In all states of the text, the transition from Heroes to witches and their offspring has this form:

il nome d'eroe è nome ch'in greca favella deriva da «amore», perch'il vicendevolesse amore fra l'iddio e l'uomo è stata cagione ch'egli sia nato sì fatto. Ma que' demoni che malvagi sono detti dall'ufficio loro, con le donne in quella guisa si congiungono che voi uomini solete; e perch'essi non potrebbero per sé generare, gittano il seme d'alcun uomo nel ventre della donna, che è di quelle che streghe sono da voi dimandate: e da sì fatti congiungimenti nascono I maghi, quale fu Merlino, che fu giudicato figliuolo del demonio.<sup>37</sup>

(the noun “Hero” is a noun that in the Greek language derives from “love” [eros], because the mutual love between the god and the man was the cause for the child's being born with such qualities. But those demons who are called evil because of their evil functions copulate with women in the same fashion that you men do. And because they could never sire anything on their own, they inject the semen of some man into the womb of one of those women whom you humans call witches: and from such copulation are born maguses, such as Merlin, who was thought to be the son of the Devil.)

Tasso apparently never discerned a problem in the alternation between Giants and Merlin as children sired by devils. This transpires from the fact that in all versions, Torquato no sooner hears the reference to Merlin than he remains satisfied with the Messenger's arguments: “Here the spirit fell silent; and I, as if all my doubts had been resolved, had nothing else to ask” (*Taceva lo spirito; e io, quasi sodisfatto d'ogni mio dubbio, non aveva che dimandare*).<sup>38</sup> The essential point seems to be that some respectable literary tradition—if not all of them—must sanction the plausibility of real offspring being born from demonic copulation.

This resolution was foreseen more than thirty-five pages earlier, when the Messenger admonished Torquato that it is unreasonable to doubt the existence of demons, given the existence of maguses, witches, and the possessed.<sup>39</sup> Since the proof that spirits exist provides the only consistent logic for the text of *Il messaggiero*, it appears that Tasso either did not notice any illogic in his substitution of the Merlin of romance for the Old Testament Giants, or was unconcerned about it.

But the entire complex of witches, Giants, and Merlin already appears together in the demonological tradition from which Tasso copied much of the lore in *Il messaggiero*. The mid-fifteenth-century inquisitor Girolamo Visconti wrote that “Commenting on the eighth distinction of the second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the Blessed Thomas, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventure,

and many, many other theologians openly confess that incubus and succubus demons exist. And in that same passage Bonaventure, Richard of St. Victor, Peter Aureali, Bonbologius, and many others say that Merlin the King [*sic*] of Britain was sired by an incubus demon. And many historians affirm the same thing."<sup>40</sup> As Visconti indicates, Merlin's inclusion in this crucial collection of Scholastic commentaries made him a commonplace in proofs about the reality of demonic copulation. Thus Tasso could have gleaned the reference from any of the many witchcraft theorists who, during a century and more, cited this catena of commentaries.

We have seen that Torquato and the Messenger also discuss the Heroes of Greek and Roman mythology as a pre-Christian analogue to the mythos of witches that early modern Christian scholars developed. But after considerable discussion, Torquato learns that tales attributing the birth of ancient Heroes to the intercourse of gods and women should be understood differently from tales about the birth of Giants,

perché gli spiriti in sogno s'appresentano a gli uomini in forma bellissima e augusta e superiore a la umana, qual è quella ch'in me vedi, sì che la lor fantasia, quasi tenacissima cera, s'imprime d'una imagine di bellezza più che mortale; e perché la virtù de la fantasia è grandissima, quando gli uomini vengono a gli abbracciamenti d'amore, venendoci pieni di sì alta imaginazione, i figliuoli che poi son prodotti soglion nascer simili a quell'eccelesse idea di valore e di bellezza ch'i padri ne la mente avean conceputa. (*Dialoghi* [ed. Mazzali], p. 55)

(because such spirits present themselves to men in dreams, in a form that is most beautiful and august and superior to the human form, such as the form in which I [the Messenger] am appearing to you. Thus their phantasy, like some extremely receptive and faithful wax, receives and holds the image of a beauty that is more than mortal; and because the power of the phantasy is most great, when these men perform the embraces of love while filled with such lofty imaginations, the children that are later born resemble that excellent idea of worth and beauty that their fathers had conceived mentally.)

As Valeria Finucci has observed, this gendering of the sexual imagination makes men responsible for whatever is praiseworthy and valued in their children (and the children here are also male, since Tasso's examples are Hercules, Perseus, Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus, Achilles, Agamemnon, and Ulysses). Men were deemed responsible for heroic progeny because of natural and rationally understandable processes that began in the mind of the father some time before the moment of fetal conception. Conversely, monstrous births were attributed to the vagaries of the maternal imagination, and Tasso's Clorinda can be understood as a conventional representation of female monstrosity brought on by the instability of female imagination.<sup>41</sup> This gendering of

imagination seems to condemn the feminine as unstable and liable to produce unnatural or even reprehensible progeny.

But whether Tasso is discussing carnal copulation or the effects of dreams, it seems that demonization of women is more an effect than a demonstrable intent or program. To be sure, demonization is amply present. Unlike the mother of Clorinda, the mothers of the Giants (as well as the mother of Merlin) were not simply plagued with unstable imaginations. Tasso's mention of the biblical Giants opens the way for a full-fledged demonization of women by making the "daughters of Cain" responsible for a hybrid race of anthropoids so evil that God's only response was to destroy them—and the world—in a flood. Likewise, witchcraft theorists demonized women by accusing them of sins allegedly beyond the capabilities of males: Heinrich Kramer even claimed that the crimes of witches were worse than those of Adam, Eve, or the fallen angels.<sup>42</sup>

But the purpose of making women responsible for hybrid or monstrous offspring was not simply (or even primarily) to tame, dispossess, and oppress women; such a program would account for only a fraction of the textual logic in Tasso's writings or those of witchcraft theorists. Theories about hybrid and monstrous offspring were a perverse homage to the procreative power that women have and men lack. We should ask why, if only demonic sex could prove demonic reality, literate men could not have derived the same metaphysical comfort by imagining their own sexual intercourse with succubus demons rather than "theorizing" that women copulated with incubi. Indeed, male copulation with succubi is not absent from witch-hunting literature. As the quotation from Silvestro Mazzolini indicates, early witchcraft theorists accused significant numbers of men of witchcraft, that is, of having sexual liaisons with succubi. According to Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, an elderly priest who was burned as the ringleader of a group of witches "confessed" that he was sexually enthralled by a succubus demon; sex with "her" was so pleasurable that he supposedly preferred to be burned at the stake rather than repudiate the succubus.<sup>43</sup> Given such intensely erotic fantasies, it is neither adequate nor consistent to claim that males failed to privilege male copulation with succubi because they were too afraid of either sex, women, or demons. Indeed, some witchcraft theorists arouse the reader's suspicion that they would have found nothing more comforting to their skepticism than to be sexually ravished by a demon, whether succubus or incubus. Furthermore, as we saw, any time a witchcraft theorist imagined a woman being impregnated by an incubus, he had necessarily already theorized the same demon as a succubus copulating with a man in order to steal semen.

One can imagine a more straightforward fantasy for proving the reality of demonic copulation: inquisitors could have imagined men impregnating "female" demons. But since by definition demons have no bodies of their own, they can have no uterus, and therefore could never bear hybrid children.<sup>44</sup> Thus the only way that Tasso and his contemporaries could imagine hybrid human-demonic children being born is through women. Accordingly, the demon had

to take the male role and, like the demon himself, the male is a marginal and limited agent in reproduction: semen must be separated from the male body for fecundation to take place, whereas the fetus has to be nurtured within the female body. With demonic copulation, as often happens with other misogynistic constructs, the misogyny betrays a perception of female power. Women were privileged as paramours of demons simply because there is no greater proof of potency than childbirth. It is true that "potency" is an androphilic concept: the demon's verisimilitude or believability depends on "his" "virisimilitude," or ability to intervene in and mimic virility by stealing semen, then penetrating and fecundating a woman's body. But proof that the demon is a "real man" (or has a realistic facsimile of virility) is enlisted to prove the reality of the demon, and that is a proof that only women can offer. The need for female fertility as proving ground of reality is ultimately a proof of male inadequacy.

To understand this is not to deny or mitigate the misogyny that made Tasso divide human interaction with spirits along gender lines, but it does suggest that men's oneiric interaction with spirits and siring of "heroic" progeny was not completely positive, as Valeria Finucci maintains. Rather, Tasso suggests that it could be profoundly unsatisfactory. His metaphor of wax and seal suggests a male fantasy of being ravished and impregnated—overcome and profoundly changed—by an irresistible and unmistakably external force. The fantasy of true conviction is a fantasy of the self as rape victim, not as rapist. Indeed, Torquato's whole problem in *Il messaggiero* is that he is never ravished, and thus he cannot decide whether his interaction with the Messenger is taking place in reality or not.

Assai m'hai tu ben provato ch'il mio non sia sogno; ma perciocché tu non ogni mio dubbio risolvi, vo pensando se sia possibile che questa sia una imaginazione non d'uomo che dorma, ma d'uomo che desto a la fantasia si dia in preda. Le forze de la virtù imaginatrice sono incredibili: e se ben pare ch'allora ella sia più possente quando l'anima, non occupata in essercitare i sensi esteriori in se stessa si raccoglie, nondimeno talora avviene ch'ella con violentissima efficacia sforzi i sensi e gli inganni di maniera ch'essi non distinguono gli obietti propri.<sup>45</sup>

(You have proved quite well to me that I'm not dreaming; but because you haven't cleared up all my doubts, I'm wondering whether it is possible that this experience is not the imagination of a man who is sleeping, but rather of a man who has fallen prey to his phantasy while awake. The powers of the imaginative faculty are incredible, and although it may seem to be more powerful when the soul closes in on itself, at those times when it is not occupied in exercising the external senses, nonetheless it sometimes happens that the imagination overpowers the senses with a most violent efficiency, so that they no longer distinguish their proper objects.)

Although Tasso, witchcraft theorists, and other males wrote extensively on the power of the female imagination, the *male* imagination disturbed them far more. If one's greatest fear is of being overcome by one's own imaginings, then women's copulation with demons—with all the grossly “pornographic” details imagined for it—is a fantasy based on envy rather than contempt. Anyone whose grasp of reality is faltering wants to be ravished by an unmistakably superior power that is unquestionably external to himself. Such a need can result in a sheerly metaphysical “womb envy.”

There is a doubly pathetic irony about the literate male fantasy that giving birth to a particular kind of child might convince a woman that she had had a sexual encounter with the suprahuman world of spirit and obtained carnal *knowledge* in the most literal sense. Perhaps only a man imagining a woman's psychosomatic reactions could fantasize this kind of intense certainty, which can be reduced to a notion that is either banal or nonsensical. Witches were tortured into assenting to another banal or nonsensical idea—to wit, that they knew whether they were “really” having sex or merely dreaming, and whether their partner was human or suprahuman. In order to imagine the suprahuman as adequately “other,” the male imagination had to produce a model of sexualized epistemology that was commensurately alien to orthodox maleness and then attribute it to women. Ironically, whether that alien epistemology corresponded to female experience is in some ways less striking than the fact that it required displacing the male role onto an “other” even more alien than women. Without minimizing the misogyny or the real violence to women that this displacement entailed, we should note that it betrays profound insecurity about the validity of male ways of knowing.

After the time of Augustine, involuntary skepticism about the reality of the spirit world was the only compelling reason for opposing the consensus, in the Western tradition of exegesis on Genesis 6, that the Giants had a purely human origin. And no one who opposed that exegetical consensus can be entirely cleared of the suspicion that, had witch-hunting been available to him as a means of investigation, he would have employed it to test the truth of the hypothesis that women could have carnal contact with demons. Precisely because most of them were highly trained clerics, witchcraft theorists could rarely if ever ignore the heterodox implications of claiming that the biblical Giants proved women could have sex with demons. Thus they had to obfuscate, prevaricate, and forget, in order to conceal their heterodoxy from their readers and, more importantly, from themselves. Like some of the most infamous and egregious witchcraft theorists, Tasso was animated by involuntary skepticism about the reality of spirit. Like them, he valued “proofs” of women's ability to have sex with demons more than the complex theological problems of free will and determinism implied by the notion that devils sired the biblical Giants. Tasso differed from witchcraft theorists only by making painstakingly explicit the ontological, epistemological, and cosmological foundations of literate males' need to believe that women could have unmistakable and intimate contact with



demons. In the *Messaggero*, Tasso performed this anxious labor with equal parts of thoroughness and naiveté.<sup>46</sup>

## Notes

1. I shall refer to the narrator of *Il messaggero* as "Torquato," to distinguish him from the empirical author Torquato Tasso. I shall also refer to "suprahuman" beings (and not "superhuman") so as to indicate their essential "otherness" from human beings.
2. Torquato Tasso, *Il messaggero*, in *Dialoghi*, ed. Ettore Mazzali (1959; reprint, Turin: Einaudi, 1976), p. 49; useful notes are also in Bruno Basile's edition of the dialogue, in *Dialoghi* (Milan: Mursia, 1991), pp. 27–104. An earlier version of the dialogue has been published by Ezio Raimondi in *Dialoghi. Edizione critica*, 3 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1958); this passage is found at 3.405. In this earlier version Torquato easily accepts the possibility of demonic sex. For other aspects of the connection between religious skepticism and demonic sex in this dialogue, see my "Tasso and the Witches," *Annali d'Italianistica* 12 (1994): 181–202.
3. Since Tasso discusses them as putative hybrid "races" distinct from ordinary human beings, I will capitalize Giants and Heroes when the words are used in this sense, even though it is unclear from the text whether Tasso shared the belief in such distinct "races." Likewise, for reasons made clear in note 8, I have translated "demoni" in this passage quite vaguely as "spirits."
4. This is now generally accepted, but the case is made most cogently by Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 36.
5. This is particularly true in the case of Bartolomeo Spina: see below.
6. Throughout the essay, I will refer to "witchcraft theory" and "witchcraft theorists" in preference to "witch-hunting" and "witch hunters," or "inquisition" and "inquisitors," since the writings I will cite are theoretical treatises based on a learned, bookish, theological tradition, not transcripts of trials.
7. This development is the subject of my *Giants in Those Days: Folklore, Ancient History, and Nationalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
8. In the *Messaggero*, Tasso distinguishes between demons (or devils, "demóni") and daemons (dèmoni), although standard orthography of Tasso's time made no provision for marking the difference between the two plurals, and it is not clear that Tasso always kept the distinction in mind. (The singular nouns, on the other hand, are easily distinguished: "demonio" [demon] versus "demone" [daemon]). The daemon is distinguished from the demon by having a body of the ethereal sort described here; moreover, daemons may be either good or evil. The demons of Christianity are incorporeal and uniformly evil. The standard description of daemons for Tasso's time is Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989). See also D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958; reprint, South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).
9. "Ch'i maghi e le streghe siano, assai chiaro il prova l'auttorità de le vostre leggi, le quali vanamente avrebbono imposte le pene a cotali artefici, se non si trovasse chi

- cotal arte esercitasse" (That magicians and witches exist is proved clearly enough by the authority of your laws, which would have vainly imposed penalties on such practitioners if there were no one who practiced such an art) *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 21. Brief discussions of actual magical misdeeds are on pp. 25 (necromancy) and 30 (the evil eye), while a catalogue of magical powers is on pp. 21–22. Magicians are defined as those who learn from their familiar spirits how to perform wonders (quelli che son detti maghi, avendo con questi spiriti familiarità, da essi imparano ad operar quelle cose ch'empiono altrui di maraviglia [*Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 34]). Significantly, Tasso makes no mention, here or elsewhere, of the demonic pact through which necromancers and witches supposedly received their powers.
10. "and by such [empty] imaginations *maghe* and other women are often deceived when they believe they are joined in amorous embraces with demons [or daemons]" (e da sì fatte imaginazioni sono molte fiate ingannate le maghe e l'altre donne che a' demoni credono di congiungersi ne gli amorosi abbracciamenti) *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 50.
  11. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Brinsley Nicholson (1886; reprint, Wakefield, Eng.: EP Publishing, 1973); Johann Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance*. Johann Weyer, *De praestigiis daemonum*, ed. George Mora et al. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991); Christopher Baxter, "Johan Wyer's, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*: Unsystematic Psychopathology," in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. Sydney Anglo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 53–75; Sydney Anglo, "Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*: Scepticism and Sadduceism," in *The Damned Art*, pp. 106–39.
  12. A graphic example is a case mentioned by Heinrich Kramer: as soon as a "witch" had been tortured into admitting her "maleficia," she was questioned as to when she abjured the Christian faith and how long she had been copulating with devils (*The Malleus maleficarum* of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, ed. Montague Summers [1928; reprint, New York: Dover, 1971], pp. 148–49); Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus maleficarum 1487 von Heinrich Kramer (Institutoris)*. Nachdruck des Erstdruckes von 1487 mit Bulle und Approbatio, ed. Günter Jerouschek (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1992), fol. 73v. Henceforth references to the *Malleus* will be given as "Kramer, *Malleus*," and will include both the page number of the English translation and the folio number of the reprinted *editio princeps*.
  13. These commonplaces can be found throughout the texts collected by Sergio Abbiati, Attilio Agnoletto, and Maria Rosario Lazzati, *La stregoneria: Diavoli, streghe, inquisitori dal Trecento al Settecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), and by Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe 1100–1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).
  14. See Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches."
  15. *Dialoghi* (ed. Raimondi), 3.421 = *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 56. Despite Torquato's satisfaction, the Messenger goes on to further discussions of suprahuman ontology; the distinction between angels and daemons, which is inchoate in the earlier redaction, is more clearly articulated in the later version.
  16. General discussions in Walter Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches" and "The Quest for Satan: Witch-Hunting and Religious Doubt, 1400–1700," in *Stregoneria e streghe nell'Europa moderna. Convegno internazionale di studi* (Pisa, 24–26 marzo 1994), ed. Giovanna Bosco and Patrizia Castelli (Pisa: Pacini, 1996), pp. 49–71.
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17. I have dealt with aspects of this topic in "Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in *Malleus maleficarum*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 495–529; "Streghe, castrati, e sacramenti. Lettura del *Malleus maleficarum*," in *La rappresentazione dell'altro nei testi del Rinascimento*, ed. Sergio Zatti (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, 1998), pp. 33–52; "Il ruolo dello sgradevole nella caccia alle streghe," in *Disarmonia, bruttezza e bizzarria nel Rinascimento. Atti del VII Convegno Internazionale (Chianciano-Pienza 17–20 luglio 1995)*, ed. Luisa Secchi Tarugi (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 1998), pp. 383–403; and "De dignitate strigis: La copula mundi nel pensiero dei due Pico e di Torquato Tasso," in *Giovanni e Gianfrancesco Pico. L'opera e la fortuna due studenti ferraresi*, ed. Patrizia Castelli (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1998), pp. 325–49. I have not, however, previously discussed the doctrinal and philosophical relation between witches and Giants, which is the topic of the present essay.
18. "Huic autem positioni qua asseritur presentes maleficas huiusmodi spurcitijs diabolicis esse infectas non nostra sententia intantum adheret, quantum ipsarum maleficarum experta testimonia, que cuncta illa reddiderunt credibilia" (Kramer, *Malleus*, p. 111; fol. 54v). "Testimonia experta" means both "expert testimony" and "testimony from experience."
19. "Secundus effectus, voluptas est incuborum et succuborum, seu certe cum incubis et succubis respective. Qui equidem effectus est mirabilis, ut homo cum spiritu habeat coitum activum, aut etiam passivum; et adeo realiter, ut inde nascatur non homo modo, verum etiam gigas, ut omnibus Theologis placet" (Silvestro Mazzolini [alias Prierias], *Reverendi Patris F. Silvestri Prieriatis Or. Praed. Theologiae Profess. Sacrique Palatii Apostolici Magistri Dignissimi, De Strigimagarum, Daemonumque Mirandis, Libri Tres, una cum praxi exactissima, et ratione formandi Processus contra ipsas, a mendis innumeris, quibus scatebant, in hac ultima impressione purgati, et Indice locupletissimo illustrati* [1521; reprint, Rome, 1575], p. 6; emphasis added).
20. See the bibliographic note in Abbiati et al., *La stregoneria*, pp. 366–68; and see Eugenio Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, 3 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), 2:508, 523, 527, and 569–70. See also John Herman Randall's introduction to and translation of Pomponazzi's *On the Immortality of the Soul*, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr. (1948; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 255–381.
21. "Ex his namque tria cognoscimus familiari experientia, quae sola fide prius cognoscebamus, licet sub quaestione cadant apud eos qui suo ingenio volunt cuncta metiri. Primum horum est, creaturas quasdam intellectuales nostris in regionibus observari scientia potentiaque super omnes homines sine comparatione praestantes, quos daemones appellamus. Secundum, quod propter haec maligna opera cognoscimus, est eosdem daemones esse malignos. Nam sensim per haec quae diximus veluti palpamus, eosdem ad innumera flagitia, dolis ac fraudibus homines inducere. Tertium est, odio saevissimo Dominum Iesum Christum eosdem insequi, bonosque Christicolae, et innocentes praeceteris variis nocumentis afficere; fidem Christi persequi, et ecclesiae sacramenta omni quo possunt vilipendio, ludibrio, opprobrioque ut dehonestentur procurare" (Bartolomeo Spina, *Quaestio de strigibus, una cum tractatu de praeminentia Sacrae Theologiae, et quadruplici apologia De Lamiis contra Ponzinibium* [1523; reprint, Rome, 1576], p. 28).
22. Protestants had equivalent problems, as I have observed in "The Quest for Satan" and "Il ruolo dello sgradevole."

23. See Stephens, "Il ruolo dello sgradevole," and "Witches Who Steal Penises."
  24. "con le donne in quella guisa si congiungono che voi uomini solete; e perch'essi non potrebbero per sé generare, gittano il seme d'alcun uomo nel ventre della donna, che è di quelle che streghe sono da voi dimandate" (*Dialoghi* [ed. Mazzali], p. 55).
  25. These matters are covered exhaustively in Kramer, *Malleus*, pp. 21–28 and 109–14 (fols. 11r–13v and 53r–56v), and Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, vol. 9, *Angels*, ed. Kenelm Foster (Cambridge: Blackfriars/McGraw-Hill/Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), pp. 39–43.
  26. See Stephens, "Witches Who Steal Penises." The crucial passage of Kramer's text (on the first folio of the entire *Malleus*) reads: "Those who say there is no such thing as witchcraft except in the imagination of men *do not believe that demons exist either*, except in the imagination of the common people; and they think that a man creates terrors for himself from his own imagination and then attributes them to a demon's activity; indeed, they assume that a powerful imagination can cause certain figures to appear to the senses exactly as a man has thought of them, so that we say he only thinks he is seeing demons, or witches" (Ideo illi qui dicunt maleficium nihil esse in mundo nisi in estimatione hominum, etiam non credunt esse demones, nisi in estimatione vulgi, tantum ut terrores quos homo sibi ipsi facit ex sua estimatione imputet demoni. Et quod etiam ex imaginatione vehementi aliquae figure apparent in sensu tales quales homo cogitat, quod et tunc creduntur demones videri dicamus, vel etiam malefici) (Kramer, *Malleus*, p. 2, emphasis added; fol. 4r–v). Summers's English translation garbles this passage so badly as to render it nonsensical.
  27. Quotations from Kramer, *Malleus*, pp. 12 and 22, fols. 7v and 11v.
  28. See the excellent articles on Ptolemy, Copernicus, and medieval cosmology in *Cosmology: Historical, Literary, Philosophical, Religious, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Norriss S. Hetherington (New York: Garland, 1993).
  29. See the chapter titles in Kramer, *Malleus*, p. i, fol. 2r.
  30. Genesis 6.1–4, Latin Vulgate and Douai English translation of Vulgate.
  31. Stephens, *Giants*, pp. 79–84 and *passim*.
  32. For the standard history of this tendency, see Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara F. Sessions (1953; reprint, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).
  33. See the notes to Tasso's dialogues by Mazzali (p. 3); and Raimondi (1.102–11).
  34. *Dialoghi* (ed. Raimondi), 3.365. The Messenger seems to remand the reader to the passage with which I began this essay, i.e., *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 49 = *Dialoghi* (ed. Raimondi), 3.405.
  35. According to Kramer (*Malleus*, pp. 28–31, fols. 13v–15r) and most early witch theorists, demons have no erotic motivation for seeking sex with humans since they have no bodies; their one wish is to pervert the human will by inducing it to fornication. Around 1700 Ludovico Sinistrari summarized a late tendency to attribute bodies to certain spirits (i.e., incubi) so as to theorize that they actually have sex drives. This allowed Sinistrari to theorize (though unsuccessfully) that incubi are simply lascivious, whereas true devils, who have no sex drive, only want to cause human damnation (Ludovico Maria Sinistrari, *Demoniality*, ed. Montague Summers [1927; reprint, New York: Dover, 1989], pp. 88–89; Ludovico Maria Sinistrari, *Demonialità, ossia possibilità, modo, e varietà dell'unione carnale dell'uomo col demonio*, ed. Carlo Carena [Palermo: Sellerio, 1986], p. 94).
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36. The most serious lapse occurs at *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 25, where an argument casting doubt on the necessary existence of angels and daemons, which had been spoken by Torquato in the earlier redaction (*Dialoghi* [ed. Raimondi], 3.342–43) is incongruously given to the Messenger, who would be logically doubting his own existence.
37. *Dialoghi* (ed. Raimondi), 3.421; the differences with *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 55 are purely orthographic in character.
38. *Dialoghi* (ed. Raimondi), 3.421 = *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 56.
39. “if magicians and witches and the possessed exist, demons exist; but it cannot be doubted that in every age specimens of the former three have been found: thus it is unreasonable to doubt that demons are found” (se sono i maghi e le streghe e li spiritati, sono i demoni; ma di quelli non si può dubitare ch’in ogni età se ne siano ritrovati: dunque è irragionevole il dubitare che si ritrovino i demoni); *Dialoghi* (ed. Raimondi), 3.336–37 = *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), p. 21.
40. “Beatus Thomas, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventura et multi atque multi theologi super distinctione octava .ii. sen. manifeste confitentur dari demones incubones et subcubones [sic]. Et ibidem dicunt Bonaventura, Richardus, Petrus Aureali, Bonbologius [sic] et multi alii Merlinum Britanie regem [sic] progenitum fuisse ex demone incubo. Multi etiam hystorici idem affirmunt” (Girolamo Visconti, *Magistri Hieronymi Vicecomitis Lamiarum sive Striarum Opusculum* [Milan, 1490; composed ca. 1460], sig. a4r). Visconti is just as reluctantly skeptical as Tasso and the other witchcraft theorists quoted in this essay. He continues: “Thus if it is possible for demons to carry people from place to place, and to have sex with them, and if such people confess that they go to the gathering or Sabbat on their own (if it is near their homes) or are carried there (if it is far away) it is therefore evident that the Sabbat or Game is real, and not an illusion of the imagination or a dream” (Si ergo possibile est quod demones possint de loco ad locum homines defferre et cum eis commiseri, et tales confiteantur quod ad locum ubi congregatio fit pergunt si eorum habitationi sit vicinus, vel portantur si est distans, ergo videtur quod talis ludus sit verus et non illusio ymaginaria vel sompniū [ibid.]). Merlin’s conception by his mother’s copulation with a demon is reproduced from a fourteenth-century French manuscript in Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe*, p. 97.
41. Valeria Finucci, “Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*”; in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in the Literature and History of Ancient and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Valeria Finucci (forthcoming at Duke University Press).
42. Such statements are mixed with many other assertions in Kramer, *Malleus*, pp. 71–88, fols. 34v–43r. The confusion comes from Kramer’s attempt to make witches a key element of his theodicy, or vindication of God’s ultimate justice toward humanity.
43. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Libro detto Strega, o delle illusioni del demonio*, ed. Albano Biondi (Venice: Marsilio, 1989), pp. 126–28; see also the case of Johannes Junius in Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown, 1959), pp. 289–93.
44. *The Faust-Book*, however, claims that Faustus sired a child (or believed he had) on “Helen of Troy,” who was, it implies, a succubus. It claims that both mother and child vanished when Faustus died (*The Historie of the Damnable Life and Deserved*

- Death of Doctor John Faustus* . . . , in Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Sylvan Barnet, [New York: Signet, 1969], p. 151, cf. pp. 137–38). Sometime between 1450 and 1470 Jean Vineti transcribed several folk tales about spectral wives who appeared to conceive children by human males (*Tractatus contra demonum invocatores* [Cologne, ca. 1487], sig. b5v, ff.). Eventually Vineti conceded that this is physiologically improbable, while nonetheless maintaining that women who claim to have had sex with male-gendered demons should not be disbelieved (sig. b6v).
45. *Dialoghi* (ed. Mazzali), pp. 16–17. Torquato goes on to list a number of loci in Latin and Italian poets, and reveals his fear that his imagination could be corrupted either by sheer folly or by melancholy.
46. For a preliminary consideration of how *Il messaggiero* elaborates and explicates demonological and epistemological anxieties already discernible in *Gerusalemme liberata*, see Walter Stephens, “La demonologia nella poetica del Tasso,” in *Torquato Tasso e l'Università*, ed. Walter Moretti and Luigi Pepe (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), pp. 411–32.

PART THREE

*Monsters and Poetics*





## CHAPTER 8

### *Monstrous Movements and Metaphors in Dante's Divine Comedy*

VIRGINIA JEWISS



What is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity? What are the filthy apes doing there? . . . The monstrous centaurs? The creatures, part man and part beast?

Bernard of Clairvaux

Scholars of medieval manuscripts, as if recalling Bernard of Clairvaux's questioning of the necessity of such disturbing monstrous representations,<sup>1</sup> have paid particular attention to the figures in the margins of manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Their studies reveal that a startling array of monsters lurk in the margins of illuminated manuscripts, fill up the borders of the page, and surround and encroach on the text. The word "margin" means the edge, border, or frontier. In texts margins serve a visual purpose, and, as any medieval illuminator or scribe knew, an ideological one; the margin is the place of the gloss, commentary, and annotation as well as the *disputatio*, the space of disagreement, juxtaposition, and conflict. Margins, and the monsters in them, create a spatial and ideological problem as well as an aesthetic and contextual challenge to the texts they accompany, for the fantastic beasts often, and seemingly inappropriately, accompany books of prayer, theological works, and spiritual meditations.

I propose to transfer the study of marginal monsters back to the text. If monsters appear with such frequency in the borders of medieval manuscripts, where do they surface in medieval literature? If they mark and engage the text visually, how do they do so verbally, thematically, structurally? If margins are charged spaces in the book qua book, what are they in the text?

I shall quickly sketch the medieval concepts of the term "monster." The word is derived from the Latin "monere," to warn. Yet Augustine traces the etymology to "monstrare" as well, the Latin term meaning to show or display.<sup>3</sup>

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Exegetes of the Vulgate followed the Ciceronian understanding of the term as an omen, a sign of things to come, while common usage, derived from Aristotle's observations in the *Generation of Animals*, held that the monstrous was anything deviating from the natural order.<sup>4</sup>

This etymological instability is fitting, for monsters are never one pure essence; indeed, hybridization, a disturbing and perverse blurring of the categories of creation, is precisely what distinguishes the monstrous from the simply bestial. By their very nature monsters escape classification, frustrate the possibility of linguistic precision, embody an ontological ambivalence, and make visible the process of mutation. Language inverts itself to articulate the monstrous, as Bernard's instable "deformed beauty" and "beautiful deformity" demonstrate. Order, like grammar, is confounded by monstrosity. C. S. Lewis, commenting on why insects are so frightening, expressed what I would deem the disturbing characteristic of the monstrous: "their angular limbs, their jerky movements, their dry metallic noises, all suggest either machines that have come to life or life degenerating into mechanism."<sup>5</sup> Lewis's insight focuses on the isolation of movement from one to another category: monsters terrify because they represent the potential for slippage on the Great Chain of Being as they move through the borders of established ontologies. It is not surprising, then, that some of the finest science fiction films exploit the liminality of the mechanical and the animate.

Thinkers in the Middle Ages based their understanding of monsters on a wide array of sources. The Bible provided the foundations for the inquiries of theologians. From the giants in the Book of Genesis to the apocalyptic vision of monstrous beasts in the Book of Revelations, Scripture provoked meditation on the existence and humanity of the monstrous races. Apocryphal texts such as The Book of Enoch sparked further inquiry into the identity of beings neither man nor beast. Pliny's *Historia naturalis* and Solinus's *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* provided the classical framework for the idea of monstrous races. Medieval elaborations of the monstrous drew upon Isidore of Seville's influential *Etymologiae* and works such as the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, which catalogues monstrous humans, beasts, and serpents.<sup>6</sup> All the great encyclopedias of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries include studies of marvels: Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Naturale*, Thomas of Cantimpré's *De natura rerum*, and Brunetto Latini's *Trésor*, to mention only a few, discuss the existence of monstrous races. Vastly popular bestiaries, inspired in part by the second century Greek *Physiologus*, teemed with descriptions of strange creaturely combinations. From the thirteenth century onward these creatures were more often than not invested with allegorical meanings or viewed as moral prodigies.<sup>7</sup> In a different vein, travel literature recorded actual and fantastic voyages and told of the existence of strange and fabulous creatures dwelling on the edges of far distant lands. Despite their differing perspectives and purposes, all of these texts reveal an enduring fascination with beings who hover on the borders of humanity and populate the undefined space between human

and animal, human and machine, human and divine. One can sense in their encyclopedic thrust the desire to clarify definitions of the human state, to probe the variations of monstrosity so as to better comprehend the boundaries of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Such an array of textual traditions notwithstanding, the most obvious place to look for monsters in the medieval world is Hell, the dark margin of God's creation, a space retrieved from classical antiquity and transformed into the Christian repository for evil. Within a Christian framework, sin must be coupled metaphorically with the monstrous, for transgression is that which deforms and makes ugly, removes one from his proper place, and disrupts both the natural and divine orders. Hence every unrepentant sinner is monstrous, having lived against the divine plan. In medieval popular belief, Hell not only contains the monstrous but is anthropomorphized into a monster, as evidenced in the numerous representations of Hell as a ravenous, gaping mouth that devours the wicked.<sup>9</sup>

*The Divine Comedy* is one of the greatest collections of monsters, bearing the traces of the various textual traditions outlined above. Monsters have always been the offspring of the poetic imagination, and Dante retrieves creatures from Virgil, Ovid, and the Homeric tradition. Expressly created to contain the monstrosities that result from sin, the *Inferno* is an encyclopedia of the monstrous. Although it would be possible to explore the figurative monstrosity of such infamous sinners as Ugolino or Ulysses found therein, I shall instead focus on what I regard as the traditional monsters, the guardians and guides of the wicked realm. Let me briefly recall them. With his hairy face and fiery eyes, Charon resurfaces from the *Aeneid* to ferry the damned souls across the Acheron.<sup>10</sup> The horrible, teeth-gnashing Minos, again from that Virgilian epic, judges the nature and degree of a sinner's transgression; with his tail, the monster determines the endpoint of man's life journey. The dog-like Cerberus, also called "il gran vermo," (the great worm, *Inf.* 6:22) guards the submerged souls of the gluttons, while in the next circle Plutus watches over the avaricious and the prodigal.<sup>11</sup> Another ferryman, Phlegyas, guards the Styx. The Furies attempt to block the pilgrim's entrance into the city of Dis and herald the monstrous Medusa. The savage Minotaur marks the passage to the realm of the violent. Centaurs guard the tyrants and murderers, and the Harpies torment the suicides. The strange hybrid Geryon carries Virgil and Dante down into the land of fraud, where a host of demons watch over the barrators boiling in pitch. Giants, born of the unnatural union of angels and women, stand guard over the deepest evil, wherein we encounter Lucifer himself. Thus, with the exception of Limbo, each of the nine circles of Hell is associated with a monster.

Much critical attention has been paid to the monsters that punctuate Dante's descent into Hell.<sup>12</sup> Although one could profitably trace the poet's monstrous borrowings to construct a rich intertextual reading, I would like to focus on certain aspects relating to the description, place, and function of monsters in the poem, in particular on four of the most intriguing monstrous

figures: the centaur Nessus, the Geryon, the giant Anteus, and the once mighty Lucifer.

The descriptions of these monstrous bodies portray them as creatures in motion, as if they are metamorphosing from one kind of being to another. Centaurs, a mythical race famous for their gluttony, are hybrids, half man and half horse.<sup>13</sup> The body of the centaur is consistently described in terms of this duality, which reveals not merely a physical perversion but a clash of two natures. Appropriately placed to guard the ring of the violent—which includes the suicides, those who turned against themselves—the centaurs display their ontological division physically. Each mention of the centaurs in the *Divine Comedy* is accompanied by a reference to this nexus: in *Inferno* 12, Chiron “al petto si mira” (gazes on his own breast; l.70); Virgil speaks to the centaur after nearing “his breast, where the two natures are consorted” (al petto, / dove le due nature son consorti; ll.83–84). In Purgatory, where centaurs are evoked as examples of the vice of gluttony, they are remembered “co’ doppi petti” (with their double breasts, *Purg.* 24:123). The insistence on their double nature underscores the fear that man could indeed become one with the beast: the corporeal violence inscribed in the body offers the tangible spectacle of such a transition.

The centaur’s chest is not the only violent edge here. After escaping the Minotaur, himself “’n su la punta de la rotta lacca” (on the edge of the broken chasm; *Inf.* 12:11), Dante and Virgil find themselves on the edge of a ditch stained red by a river of boiling blood. Because this hostile terrain is impassable for the still-living pilgrim, Nessus is assigned the task of transporting him across this obstacle. As he carries Dante on his back, the centaur evokes an earlier river passage: Nessus had carried Hercules’ wife in just such a manner, but that became a voyage to death. The river crossing he performs in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was not simply a geographical translocation but a transgression of the socially established boundaries of marriage.<sup>14</sup> When Nessus attempts to violate Deianira, Hercules shoots him with a poisoned arrow. Before dying, the centaur gives Deianira a robe, dipped in his blood, and tells her that the garment will preserve her husband’s love for her. When, at a later point, she is overcome by jealousy but as yet unaware of the centaur’s treachery, Deianira offers her husband the robe. The tainted gift drives him mad, and the great Hercules burns himself to death, leaving his widow to hang herself in grief. Nessus bears this history with him in the *Inferno* as he carries Dante to the ring where the suicides are punished.

A more complex monstrosity appears a few cantos later. The travelers come to a precipice, the impassability of which is emphasized twice, in the words “ripa discoscesca” (a precipitous bank; *Inf.* 16:103) and “alto burrato” (depth of that abyss; 16:114). There is, it seems, no way to proceed. So Virgil throws the cord Dante has been wearing into the deep, thus summoning the strange creature Geryon, which swims to the surface.

E quella sozza imagine di froda  
 sen venne, e arrivò la testa e 'l busto,  
 ma 'n su la riva non trasse la coda.  
 La faccia sua era faccia d'uom giusto,  
 tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle,  
 e d'un serpente tutto l'altro fusto;  
 due branche avea pilose insin l'ascelle;  
 lo dosso e 'l petto e ambedue le coste  
 dipinti avea di nodi e di rotelle.  
 Con più color, sommesse e sovrapposte  
 non fer mai drappi Tartari né Turchi,  
 né fuor tai tele per Aragne imposte.  
 Come talvolta stanno a riva i burchi,  
 che parte sono in acqua e parte in terra,  
 e come là tra li Tedeschi lurchi  
 lo bivero s'assetta a far sua guerra,  
 così la fiera pessima si stava  
 su l'orlo ch'è di pietra e'l sabbion serra.  
 Nel vano tutta sua coda guizzava,  
 torcendo in sù la venenosa forca  
 ch'a guisa di scorpion la punta armava.  
 (Inf. 17:7-27)

(And that foul image of fraud came onward, and landed his head and his bust, but he did not draw his tail onto the bank. His face was the face of a just man, so benign was its outward aspect, and all his trunk was that of a serpent; he had two paws, hairy to the armpits; his back and breast and both his sides were painted with knots and circlets. Tartars or Turks never made cloth with more colors of groundwork and pattern, nor were such webs laid on the loom by Arachne.

As sometimes boats lie at the shore, part in the water and part on land, and as there among the guzzling Germans the beaver settles himself to wage his war, so lay that worst of beasts upon the edge of stone which bounds the sand. All his tail was quivering in the void, twisting upward its venomous fork, which had the point armed like a scorpion's.)

Geryon has long been understood as an emblem of fraud, the wise man with the scorpion's tail. As this passage makes clear, he combines the three natures of man, beast, and serpent delineated in the *Liber monstrorum di diversis generibus*. Read linearly, his body gradually unfolds as a series of different creatures merged into one. This most enigmatic of Dante's monsters escapes definition as he metamorphoses under the poet's pen. He is described as one who swims

(16:131) and then is compared to a beaver (17:22), a boat (17:100), an eel (17:104), a falcon (17:127), and an arrow (17:136). There is no way to fix his identity in any of these images, the juxtaposition of which conveys a fluctuation between animate and mechanical. As his body blends from one type of creature to another, so the corporeal merges with and figures the topographical to form a visual ethics: Geryon is the ever-changing monster who ushers Dante into the realm of fraud, the sin of deception and false appearances.

Such ambivalence arises not simply in his physical appearance but also in his movement and position on the edge of the abyss. Geryon remains in a disquietingly indeterminate position as he travels through a medium that is described as air as well as water. The pairing in 17:16 of “sommesse e sovrapposte,” (which Mandelbaum translates effectively as “background and relief”), while ostensibly referring to the carpet-like designs on his skin, augments the duality of both the nature and position of the beast.<sup>15</sup> That he is both above and below, or on and off the shore is emphasized twice in the passage above (ll. 8–9, 19–20), as he surfaces from the shadowy margins of stone that mark the edge of the sand (ll. 23–24). Untethered from any one ontology, he moves uneasily over undefinable terrain.

Geryon, like Nessus, also moves the pilgrim who climbs on his back. While the individual iconography of each monstrous creature reveals its hybrid nature, their placement in the poem furthers the idea of transition. Beings caught in the process of becoming, they are, in themselves, figures of movement, intrinsically connected to and essential participants in the topos of the journey, the grounding allegory of Dante’s poem.<sup>16</sup> As I noted earlier, each circle below Limbo is inhabited or guarded by a monster. More precisely, monsters dwell on the edges, at notable thresholds on the pilgrim’s journey. Thus, in addition to marking the transition from one level to another, they help define the entrance to the mouth of Hell and to Hell proper, the gates of the city of Dis, and the exit from the eternally dark realm. Most significantly, monsters appear at difficult junctures in the journey, places where the terrain is impossible to traverse without their intervention. Indeed, the most startling feature of these strange beasts is that they carry the pilgrim through these hard places and transport him over the impassable abysses of the ruined realm. We have already seen how Dante mounts the shoulders of the centaur and climbs onto the magic carpet that is Geryon. In order to complete his descent through Hell, he will need the intervention of two other monsters.

In *Inferno* 31 Dante and Virgil approach the ninth and final circle, the central pit of Hell, wherein traitors are punished. In the distance, Dante thinks he sees a city, but Virgil corrects him: what seem to be the walls of Montereccioni are actually giants, animate bodies looming over the infernal plain. Created when angels copulated with the daughters of men, giants are the grotesque outcome of the union of two diverse orders of being.<sup>17</sup> In his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle holds the following about monstrous offspring: “in no case are they what they are alleged to be, but resemblances only.”<sup>18</sup> It has

already been noted how this is true for Geryon, but Aristotle's theory is just as applicable to Dante's perception of the giants and, as we shall see, to Lucifer. As in *Inferno* 17, a deliberate confusion between architecture and animation marks canto 31. In Dante's *contrapasso* system of punishment, Nimrod, the proud ruler who challenged the limits of human existence by building the tower of Babel, becomes the very structure he sought to erect, except that here he points downward, his monumental stature joining him not with God but with Satan, emperor of the underworld. The face of the once great builder now is likened to an architectural element of St. Peter's (31:58–59). Antaeus, another giant, is compared to Garisenda, one of the towers of Bologna, and then to the mast of a ship (31:136, 145). The term for mast, "albero in nave," furthers this tension between construct and living being. More to the point, the image of the ship continues the seafaring allusions employed throughout the cantic and draws attention to the giant's role in Dante's arduous journey from the shipwreck of *Inferno* 1. For it is Antaeus who carries Dante and Virgil down to the bottom of the evil terrain. As with Nessus, the giant's participation in Dante's salvation recalls his own death. Son of Neptune and Earth, Antaeus was invincible as long as he was in contact with his mother Earth. Hercules severs that bond by lifting him from the ground and slaying him.<sup>19</sup> In a gesture poignantly reminiscent of his own demise, the giant lifts Virgil and Dante in his grasp and places them below.

The final and greatest monster, Satan, dwells at the navel of the realm of evil. The rigid brutishness of Lucifer, that once most beautiful darling of Paradise, is now eternally frozen in his empty, fallen vanity. Cast out of heaven, "lo 'mperador del doloroso regno" (the emperor of the woeful realm; *Inf.* 34:28) is forever mute, base, and bestial. Ugly bats' wings parody his former seraphic grandeur. In a final elaboration of the ambiguity of animate and machine, the pilgrim thinks he sees a windmill, "un molin che 'l ventro gira" (a mill which the wind turns; *Inf.* 34:6). Despite his total inversion and negation, Satan nevertheless performs the mediating role he shunned in his vainglorious fight: he "ne fé scala col pelo" (made a ladder for us with his hair; *Inf.* 34:119). His legs become the pilgrim's ladder of ascent, and Dante crosses his body as if it were a stairway. Virgil, with Dante on his back, grasps the hairy legs and climbs. Satan is none other than the bridge linking the world below to that above, the vehicle through which Dante progresses on his journey. More specifically, it is precisely in crossing Satan's body that down becomes up and Hell is revealed as part of the pilgrim's path to Heaven. Satan not only marks the farthest edge of the dark world. He is the threshold and bridge between Hell and Purgatory.

We must marvel that monsters, which cause wonder and strike fear in the heart of the pilgrim, nevertheless are put to work for his benefit. Within the confines of Hell, Dante manages to expand the definition of the monstrous: they become modes of transportation that ultimately carry him beyond the edges of the evil realm toward heaven. Despite their sinful natures, their frightful

appearance, and their threats to halt Dante's progress, the monsters aid him on his journey of salvation.

What can we infer from this observation that monsters become modes of transport, that they work for the pilgrim's spiritual good? The monsters of the *Divine Comedy* clearly serve a utilitarian purpose. They are part of rather than opposed to God's plan and fit within the general framework of Dante's poetics articulated in the first canto: "ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai, / dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte" (But, to treat of the good that I found in it, I will tell of the other things I saw there; *Inf.* 1:8–9). Dante pushes beyond the horrors of Hell and beyond an aesthetics of the ugly to articulate an instrumentality of the monstrous that unfolds within the parameters of God's grace.

Interestingly, Isidore of Seville makes a subtle but crucial distinction in his study of monsters that is relevant to my point. In his *Etymologies*, Isidore insists that monsters are not contrary to Nature because they are made by divine will and thus are intended to be part of creation. Rather, they are against what we call nature.<sup>20</sup> In other words, monsters startle and terrify us but they do not ruffle God, for they are part of his design, intentional rather than accidental creatures. Isidore's definition, which posits that monsters are within God's framework but outside of ours, is striving toward the type of instrumentality Dante creates in the *Inferno*.

Augustine struggles with a similar question in the *City of God*. In a chapter entitled "The origin of recorded monstrosities" he discusses whether there could be antediluvian creatures among us. Augustine avoids determining whether monstrous races actually exist and, if they do, whether they are human and therefore in need of salvation. Instead he reasons that there may indeed be monstrous races just as there are individual monstrous births within races. Augustine insists that in the face of such seeming monstrosity man has no right to judge the wonders of divine creation, for God certainly has a reason for his acts. He then eloquently suggests that God may have created the fabulous races in order to convince us that the instances of monstrous births we see among our fellow humans are not failures: "For God is the creator of all, and he himself knows where and when any creature should be created or should have been created. He has the wisdom to weave the beauty of the whole design out of the constituent parts, in their likeness and diversity. The observer who cannot view the whole is offended by what seems the deformity of a part, since he does not know how it fits in, or how it is related to the rest."<sup>21</sup> Augustine's emphasis is on the didactic and ethical impact of the monstrous; by moralizing monstrosity he places it squarely within the framework of human salvation, disarming it of its evil powers and subsuming its fearful elements into divine intention.

The didactic and theological force of monstrous apparitions can be traced throughout the *Comedy*. Dante draws on thinkers such as Augustine and Isidore, but he tames the monsters in his own way, making them instruments of his journey and allowing them to move him through his poem. In order to



follow the poet's insight, I would like to return to the idea of movement and mediation that is present both in the body and the location in Hell of the monsters as well as in their active participation in the pilgrim's journey, for it leads us to the poetic trope of metaphor. Defined by Aristotle in terms of movement, metaphor means displacement and transference and consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else. According to the *Poetics*, metaphor contributes to knowledge and learning, alters and revives our perspective, challenges complacency of thought, creates a new reality, and lifts us to epiphany. Aristotle assigns metaphor both to rhetoric and to poetics, making it a unifying conceit between two linguistic categories. Metaphor "works" the way the monsters work—by crossing over difficult ruptures and joining two disparate realms. Dante recognizes that metaphor is a crucial element of Christian theology as well as of poetry.

To fully comprehend the implications of the monstrous as linked to metaphor and theology, it is essential to note that it is not only the monstrous that hinges on ambivalence and duality. Christian theology unfolds around the miraculous paradox that Christ is both man and God, a seemingly impossible conjunction of the human and divine. More specifically for the *Divine Comedy*, such a notion of instrumentality prepares the way for the arrival of the griffin in *Purgatorio* 29.<sup>22</sup> A creature that can only be described as a monstrous hybrid of an eagle and a lion, the griffin is presented in terms strongly reminiscent of the centaurs: "la fiera ch'è sola una persona in due nature," (the animal that is one person in two natures, *Purg.* 31:80–81). In fact, attention is drawn to the griffin's breast in a way that specifically reminds us of the body of the centaur: "al petto del grifon" (to the breast of the griffin; *Purg.* 31:113) is a direct echo of *Inferno* 12:70 and 84.<sup>23</sup> And yet this "monster" is far from ugly; indeed, it is a figure of incomparable majesty and dignity that has been interpreted as a symbol of Christ in his two natures, human and divine.<sup>24</sup> In a charged and symbolically complex scene, the griffin effectively suspends the ethical category of evil traditionally associated with the monstrous and elaborated in the *Inferno*. Furthermore, in an evocation of the infernal role of the monstrous, the griffin moves through the canto pulling the chariot that carries Beatrice, herself a strange and new figure who returns from the *Vita nuova* and embodies her own dualities: both alive and dead, endpoint and threshold to the full and deep vision of God beyond her.

Bernard of Clairvaux was troubled that the monstrous creatures adorning the cloisters would distract the monks from their holy meditations.

You may see many bodies under one head, and conversely many heads on one body. On one side the head of a quadruped is on the body of a fish. Over there an animal has a horse for the front half and a goat for the back; here a creature which is horned in front is equine behind. In short, everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in

the marble than in books, and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God.<sup>25</sup>

Dante refutes the oppositional relationship of wondering (*mirando*) to meditating (*meditando*) that Bernard establishes in this passage. Rather than concede such marvels to Hell and yield their beautiful deformities solely to the power of sin, Dante brings the monstrous out of the dark underworld into the light of Purgatory. He perceives monsters not merely as grotesque creatures who inhabit the margins of the Underworld but as the embodiment of God's power to create, to move, and to cause wonder. Just as they stood transfixed by the arrival of the Geryon, Dante and Virgil now stand in "*ammirazione pieno*" (full of wonder; *Purg.* 29:55) at the spectacle of the griffin. In Dante's vision, monsters, be they the perverse creations of sin in Hell or the marvelous creature of Purgatory, induce an awe that places God's mysterious presence at the center of the poet's journey.

## Notes

1. Bernard poses these questions in relation to the strange beasts represented in cloister decoration. "[Q]uid facit illa ridicula monstruositas, mira quaedam deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas? Quid ibi immundae simiae? . . . Quid monstrousi centauri? Quid semihomines?" *Apologia* 12.29. For the English translation, see Conrad Rudolph, *The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's "Apologia" and the Medieval Attitude toward Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 283.
2. Instructive examples of "marginal art" in medieval manuscripts and architecture are reproduced in several studies on the subject. See in particular Lilian Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Gigetta Dall'i Regoli, *Mostri, maschere e grilli nella miniatura medievale pisana* (Pisa: Giardini Editore, 1980); Janetta Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992); and Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Camille analyzes the role of the marginal in manuscripts, paying particular attention to monsters, and he also includes a useful bibliography. For further studies on this topic, see Janetta Rebold Benton, "Gargoyles: Animal Imagery and Artistic Individuality in Medieval Art," in *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Nona Flores (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 147–66; Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, "The Margins of Society in Marginal Romanesque Sculpture," *Gesta* 31 (1992): 15–24; and David A. Sprunger, "Parodic Animal Physicians from the Margins of Medieval Manuscripts," in *Animals in the Middle Ages*, ed. Flores, pp. 67–81. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen focuses on monsters in Old English materials in "Old English Literature and the Work of Giants," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24 (1993): 1–32.
3. "The name 'monster,' we are told, evidently comes from *monstrare*, 'to show,' because they show by signifying something." *De civitate Dei* 21.8; Augustine, *City of God*, trans. John O'Meara (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 982.

4. "Anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has strayed from the generic type." Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 401.
5. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, and World, Inc., 1955), p. 8.
6. Andy Orchard provides a helpful discussion of the *Liber monstorum* in his *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the "Beowulf" Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 86–115. An English translation is included in his appendix 3. See also D. Butturff's *The Monsters and the Scholar: An Edition and Critical Study of the "Liber monstorum"* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968).
7. Rudolf Wittkower surveys these classical and medieval texts and traces the development of the moralizing tendency in the bestiary tradition in his "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 159–97. Claude Lecouteux elaborates on these traditions in *Les Monstres dans la pensée médiévale européenne* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1993), which offers an excellent history of monsters in the Middle Ages. For further references to the monstrous in the Middle Ages, see Claude Kappler, *Monstres, demons et merveilles a la fin de le moyen age* (Paris: Payot, 1980).
8. John Block Friedman emphasizes the way in which inquiries on the monstrous races helped define the human state in the Middle Ages in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Joyce E. Salisbury works toward a similar point but through the study of animals in *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Arnold I. Davidson extends the study of the relationship between human and monstrous into the Renaissance and the Romantic period in "The Horror of Monsters," in *The Boundaries of Humanity*, ed. James Sheehan and Morton Sosna (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 36–67. Marie-Hélène Huet addresses the issue of monstrosity and identity from the Renaissance on in *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
9. Benton discusses several examples of the Mouth of Hell in "Gargoyles." Many of the examples she discusses there are illustrated in her *The Medieval Menagerie* and in Bonnie Young, *A Walk through the Cloisters* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1988).
10. Charon best fits the description of a "wild man," a category linked to the monstrous. For more thorough treatment of this idea, see Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), and Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," in *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maxmillian Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), pp. 3–38.
11. Unless otherwise noted, all citations and translations of the *Divine Comedy* are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. with commentary by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970–76).
12. The most thorough treatment of the topic is by Gérard Luciani, *Les monstres dans "La Divine Comédie"* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1975). Joseph Venturini provides a comparative study of monsters from Dante to Marino in his "Les monstres dans le poésie narrative italienne de Dante à Marino, et leur signification morale," *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 188 (Fall 1982): 149–78. Richard Thayer Holbrook includes a chapter on "the Devil and his brood" in *Dante and the Animal Kingdom* (New York:

- Columbia University Press, 1902), pp. 30–76. Christopher Kleinhenz provides an overview of *Inferno*'s monsters in his study of Cerberus, "Infernal Guardians Revisited: 'Cerberus, il gran vermo,' (*Inf.* vi, 22)" *Dante Studies* 93 (1975): 185–99.
13. For an explanation of their gluttonous nature, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 12.210–12, 215–25, 227–31. Page DuBois details the history of the centaur in literature in *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).
  14. The relevant episodes are related in *Metamorphoses*, 9.127–33, 152–62, 166–69.
  15. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno, A Verse Translation*, by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).
  16. Although I do not discuss the punishment of the thieves, many of the issues raised here are also graphically portrayed in the endlessly repeating metamorphoses of humans and serpents in *Inferno* 25.
  17. For an extensive literary and cultural history of the giant, see Walter Stephens's *Giants in Those Days: Folklore, Ancient History and Nationalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).
  18. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 419.
  19. The story is related in Lucan, *Pharsalia* 4. 593–660.
  20. "Portenta esse ait Varro quae contra naturam nata videntur; sed non sunt contra naturam, quia divina voluntate fiunt." Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* 11. c.3,1; *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 82, c. 419.
  21. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.8; *City of God*, trans. O'Meara, p. 662.
  22. The arrival of the griffin, preceded by four beasts, is described in *Purgatorio* 29: 92–114.
  23. The two natures of the griffin are also emphasized in *Purgatorio* 31:122 and 32:47, 96.
  24. Isidore of Seville notes the griffin's composite nature, half eagle, half lion, and then compares Christ to these two beasts, *Etymologiae* 12.2.17 and 7.2.43–44. For an extensive treatment of the scene in *Purgatory*, see Peter Armour, *Dante's Griffin and the History of the World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). In his insightful study of the griffin in classical and medieval lore, Armour emphasizes the creature's dual nature and discusses the problematic Christological associations that Dante employs. Interestingly for my argument, Armour notes that in medieval Rome "the griffin persisted mainly as a symbolic defender, especially of doors, and, in the context of churches, sanctuaries, and sacred objects, as a warning . . . not to approach or desecrate" (p. 17). Later he recalls legends in which the griffin carries men aloft (pp. 24–25). Such information furthers the association of the griffin with the monsters in *Inferno*.
  25. The full passage reads as follows: "Videas sub uno capite multa corpora, et rursus in uno corpore capita multa. Cernitur hinc in quadrupede cauda serpentis, illinc in pisce caput quadrupedis. Ibi bestia praefert equum, capram trahens retro dimidium; hic cornutum animal equum gestat posterius. Tam multa denique, tamque mira diversarum formarum apparet ubique varietas, ut magis legere libeat in marmoribus, quam in codicibus, totumque diem occupare singula ista mirando, quam in lege Dei meditando." *Apologia* 12.29. For the English translation, see Rudolph, *The "Things of Greater Importance,"* p. 283.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Monstrous Language, Monstrous Bodies: Bartolotti's Macharonea Medicinalis*

ANTONELLA ANSANI



Of all the non-canonical Italian Renaissance literary productions, macaronic poetry is unquestionably the most remarkable, as it poignantly transgresses, both in form and content, those classical precepts that were at the very foundations of the literary and cultural pursuits of the time. The earlier macaronic texts originated during the last two decades of the fifteenth century in the academic milieu of Padua, the capital of linguistic experimentalism throughout the Renaissance. This was a linguistically unstable period for Italy, when fourteenth-century literary Tuscan, humanistic Latin, and local dialects were all still competing for literary supremacy.<sup>1</sup> It is within this linguistic conflict that macaronic poetry finds its *raison d'être*. Macaronic, in fact, is an artificial, hybrid language that blends classical Latin morphology with lexical and syntactic structures of northern Italian dialects, primarily of Padua, Mantua, and Cremona: Latin inflections are added to Italian or dialect stems, and in turn Latin words are intentionally italianized.<sup>2</sup> By combining these three languages in their classical hexameters, macaronic poets generate what Ugo Enrico Paoli has aptly defined as a highly sophisticated linguistic monster. Other existing forms of a hybrid Latin simply alternate sentences written in different languages (i.e., Latin and French, or Latin and German), or regularly insert words from a different language into a correct Latin text. These linguistic operations, Paoli insists, do not produce a monster. Their visual equivalent would be a man next to a horse, or a woman closely followed by a fish. On the other hand, true monsters, like a centaur or a siren, are obtained only through the reciprocal interpenetration of two different natures. Following the same dynamic at work in the production of corporeal monsters, macaronic poetry does more than merely juxtapose Latin, Italian,

and northern dialects; it wholly merges them, generating a veritable linguistic monster.<sup>3</sup>

Monstrosity in macaronic poetry, however, is not limited to the linguistic sphere, but is at the very core of the genre. Linguistic subversion is in fact paralleled by a series of intentional deformations and reversals of classical conventions. Thus, macaronic poetry enacts what might be called a carnival of rhetorics. In imitation of epic poems, for instance, the macaronic poet invokes the Muses to help him in his endeavor of singing the life and deeds of his hero(s). The macaronic muses, however, are whores, and the heroes “*facchini*,” that is, porters, or most specifically peasants from Bergamo, the customary pariahs of Renaissance comic literature.

Moreover, subverting the lofty subjects of “high” literature, macaronic poetry favors those themes belonging to culinary, scatological, and sexual spheres. Macaronic poets, as Cesare Segre clearly explains “rather than promoting a humble style to represent sublime subject matters, have bent the sublime style to represent humble matters.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the most conspicuously transgressive aspect of macaronic poetry, which is clearly related to thematic preferences of this genre, is the representation of the grotesque, monstrous body described in all its most obscene functions. I would claim that the two monstrous forms, language and bodies, are thoroughly interdependent, and that one could not exist without the other. In her book *Monstrous Imagination*, Marie-Hélène Huet reminds us that Latin continued to be the favored language of medical texts until at least the eighteenth century. This happened not only because Latin was considered the privileged scientific language, but also because it was believed that “anatomical descriptions would be less shocking if expressed in words removed from everyday exchange and communication.”<sup>5</sup> By the same token, I argue that the monstrous bodies of the macaronic imagination could be appropriately and acceptably described only through an equally monstrous language, by far more removed than Latin from everyday forms of verbal transaction.

More importantly, the interdependence existing between the monstrous language and the monstrous bodies it shows forth is embodied in the very term “macaronic,” which the poets themselves chose to qualify their poetry.<sup>6</sup> As Paoli demonstrates, the “*maccheroni*” from which the term macaronic derives are a sort of “*gnocchi*,” a word that in turn signifies literally a kind of coarse and lumpy dough similar to dumplings, and, by extension a stupid person, more specifically a simpleton.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the word macaronic not only signifies the language of this poetry but also its characters (the “*facchini*”), as well as the food of which they are so uncontrollably gluttonous.

David Williams suggests that a strong connection exists between monstrosity and language. He observes that the mouth, in its basic functions of admitting and emitting, is a significant example of those different body parts upon which monstrosity is engendered: “the deformity of the mouth produces a series of monsters connoting the dysfunction of speech, abnormal ingestion,

and the negation of separation established by the buccal threshold."<sup>8</sup> Macaronic monsters certainly belong to this group, further confirming that macaronic poetry intentionally fuses its monstrous language with its monstrous, devouring bodies in an indissoluble manner.

For this reason, the general tendency of critics to dwell almost exclusively on the linguistic peculiarities of macaronic poetry, while neglecting to examine its grotesque bodies, appears at least questionable. As Barbara Spackman has pointed out, their philological studies on the relation between the *volgare*, Latin, and dialect "have left untouched what is perhaps more vulgar," which is precisely the aspect of macaronic poetry I will address here.<sup>9</sup>

The text I examine, the *Macharonea medicinalis*, is the longest, the last written, the last discovered, as well as the most obscene of the few surviving texts that preceded the composition of Teofilo Folengo's *Baldus*, a twenty-five book epic generally recognized as the masterpiece of macaronic poetry. Preserved in number 461 of the Western manuscripts in the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London (and catalogued in 1973), the *Macharonea medicinalis* was published by William Schupbach in 1978.<sup>10</sup> The 1,029-line poem, which is divided into two parts, the first dated 1498 and the second December 20, 1509, is a farcical chronicle of the extraordinary character, life, and deeds of a quack. Schupbach identifies the author as Gian Giacomo Bartolotti, a doctor who became prior of the Collegio de' medici fisici of Venice; he was also the author of a university lecture on *De antiquitate medicinae* (On the Antiquity of Medicine) and of the Latin pastoral poem *Phileni cupido* (The Desire of Philenus).

According to Schupbach, what makes the *Macharonea* particularly significant is that unlike preceding macaronic texts, which ridicule the Paduan philosophical and legal milieu, it is the only existing poem aimed at the medical profession. What makes the poem less interesting, however, is that

Bartolotti's protagonist . . . is not a physician travestied as a *facchino*, as the conventions of the genre would require: he really is a *facchino*. . . . Whereas there would have been a point in satirizing the charlatanry of the erudite, mockery of *facchini* was merely pouring ridicule on the already ridiculous. However, it is doubtful whether Bartolotti was concerned with satire at all. . . . The "satire" consists of bizarre and indecent fantasies which reveal more about the author than about the quacks. Bartolotti deliberately avoids mentioning historical personages, but without an identifiable target there is no satire. . . . These considerations suggest that the poem was written for the author's entertainment only, and not for publication.<sup>11</sup>

Schupbach's interpretation of macaronic satire appears to be limited. I propose to show that the monstrous language and bodies of macaronic poetry represent tensions that go well beyond blunt vulgarity or overt personal attack.

More specifically, I will argue that Bartolotti's lewd poem is engaged, through an intertextual play with works by Petrarch, in a polemical battle against the cultural axioms of the time.

After a typical beginning of epic resonance, where "gaiofi," "furfantes," "putanae," and "zaratanes" (rascals, scoundrels, whores and charlatans) are invoked to aid the poet in "dicere laudes tam grandis hominis" (ll.4–5) (to praise such a great man), the tale of the *Macharonea* begins: "Urbs antiqua fuit multis copiosa fachinis" (l.19) (There was an ancient city full of many "facchini").<sup>12</sup> Among them, one stands out for his unique qualities, and from the beginning he foreshadows a very special destiny. The reader is led into the narrative realm of a saint's life, where the protagonist is always presented in all his positive traits, indicating his predestination to glorification. Here, however, the eschatological promises implicit in hagiography are immediately turned upside down, and the poem takes off on a scatological mode that will overwhelmingly and significantly characterize it.

Noster at hic esset medicus dum forte putinus.  
in uultu bellus, bellus in panza culoque,  
atque in cacephaton pulcher, pulcherque coionis.  
Semper guardabat merdas et semper urinas  
porcus urinaret si quando aut uacha cagaret  
aut equus aut mulus. Semper de merda dicebat,  
parlabat merdas, merdas cantabat et omni  
tempore merda fuit, nec erat nisi stercus in ore.  
(ll.33–40)

(But this doctor of ours, when he was a child, had a beautiful face, had a beautiful tummy and rump, and also had a beautiful cock, beautiful balls. He always studied the shit and the urine whenever the pig took a piss or the cow took a shit, or the horse or the mule. He was always talking about shit, always spoke about shit, always sang about shit, ever and always about shit, nor was he ever without dung in his mouth.)

Our hero's parents, recognizing in this excremental fixation the makings of a great doctor, consult the city council, which resolves that he should go to study medicine in Venice. Clothed in a doctor's garb, he arrives in Venice, where he finds a position as a tutor (pedante) for the children and servants of a nobleman. Rather than teaching them, however, he mostly engages them in various sexual activities, and thus "calcibus e casa subito fuit iste cazatus" (l.81) (he was right away kicked out of the house). He is subsequently employed in a monastery, where, while continuing his sexual exploits with the monks, he occupies himself in the examination of their excrement, as part of his training to become, fittingly, a "merdicus" (the word "merdicus" is a paronomasia played upon the word "medicus" [doctor] and "merda" [shit]). Forced to flee



the monastery, he fraternizes with Caseus Cabalus. As his name indicates—it is in fact the macaronic for “caciocavallo,” a pear-shaped cheese—he is an extremely well-endowed fellow, and our doctor begins a friendly and sexual relation with him.

At this point in the narration, our doctor discovers that a rich widow is looking for a husband, and thus he begins parading in front of her house, displaying both his sexual attributes and his newly purchased crimson doctoral attire, which proclaims him as “doctorissimus.” To complete his courtship, he writes her a long love letter.

Chara madona mihi plus dulcis melibus apum  
 plus dulcis zucchero, plus dulcis et codognata  
 plus bona quam rostum, plus suavis uncta menestra  
 omnipotens deus tibi det bona sera bonanum!  
 Si possem tantos, credas, soffrire dolores,  
 tot passionnes et tot tormenta cerebro,  
 hos ausus nunquam fuissem scribere versus  
 suspiriis plenos lachrimis pariterque bagnatos.  
 Sed quia in extrema sum zontus morte, chiamabo  
 te solam ut misero succuras, chara, moroso.

(ll. 165–74)

(Dear lady, sweeter to me than honey, sweeter than sugar, even sweeter than quince jam, tastier than a roast and smoother than a fatty soup, may God almighty give you the good evening and the happy new year! Believe me, if I could endure such great pains, such great passions, and such great torments in my head, I wouldn't have dared writing these verses, full of sighs and equally bathed in tears. But since I have come to the point of death I will call out for you only, my dear one, so that you'll come and help me, a miserable wretch.)

The first verses of the doctor's love letter are representative of that comic-realistic literary tradition that had developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in opposition to the preeminent lyrical production. Yet they also expose the extreme potentials of that tradition when they deliberately slip into the rhetoric of macaronic voraciousness, where the beloved's sweetness is suddenly compared to the savoriness of a roast and the succulence of a fatty soup. More interestingly, it is evident in this text that by the end of the fifteenth century the dictates of Petrarchism, and subsequently anti-Petrarchism, have already been assimilated, before their official, albeit obviously a posteriori, codification in Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua*. That distinctive Petrarchan device of fragmenting a thought or an expression into a chain of two or more, either synonymic or antithetical links—exemplified by the celebrated verse “Chiare fresche et dolci acque” (Clear, fresh, sweet waters)—is in these

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verses fully at work. After having established a clear anti-Petrarchan rhetoric, however, the author quickly carries out an additional reversal. The object of the discourse of love is suddenly switched: the doctor, rather than praising, more or less humorously, the beauty and worth of the beloved, begins an extended and utterly obscene celebration of his own qualities, which will make his lover happier and more satisfied than the queen of France:

Nam tibi si fuero, bellissima dona, maritus  
 nulla erit in toto magis contenta Rialto  
 foemina; namque omni te semper nocte ficabo  
 uiginti uoltis in buca, panza, culoque.  
 Est mihi cazephaton longa mensura tiratus  
 quadratus, durus, grossus, neruosus at ingens,  
 cum quatuor pendens magnis tondisque balotis.  
 (ll.175–81)

(Indeed, if I shall be your husband, beautiful lady, no woman will be more content than you in all of the Rialto. Indeed, every night I will always give it to you twenty times in the mouth, up the gut, and up the ass. I have a big long cock, squared, hard, fat, eager, and enormous, hanging between four big round balls.)

The description continues in detail, offering us a comprehensive preview of that grotesque body Rabelais will celebrate a few decades later, and which Bakhtin has characterized in our own time. According to Bakhtin, “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world . . . on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the classical body is seen as “a strictly completed, finished product. It is isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies.”<sup>14</sup>

I would suggest, however, that in the anti-Petrarchan context of our “*medicus*’s” love letter, Bakhtin’s classification itself seems to undergo a reversal. As critics have often pointed out, in his poetry Petrarch never conveys a complete description of Laura; instead he fragments her body into a series of disassociated, scattered objects, particularly hair, hand, foot and eyes. Described only in the details of her extremities, Laura’s body itself is conspicuously absent.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the doctor’s grotesque body, punctiliously described in its most nuclear element, the genitals, is overwhelmingly present. I will come back to this idea of present versus absent bodies, but I would like to return for a moment to our doctor.

Persuaded by his eloquent letter, the rich widow accepts the doctor’s marriage proposal. The rest of the first part of the poem is dedicated to praise of the doctor’s intellectual faculties. He is satirized as a “*phylosophus*,”

“theologus,” and “astrologus,” who understands and knows everything (and by now we can guess the substance of that knowledge). As a doctor, he is versed in all the branches of medicine: he is a “herbolatus,” a herbalist, in truth more interested in edible than curative plants, “cognoscit uerzas coctas cum carne de porco/spinachia et bletas, rauanellos atque fenochios” (ll.286–87) (he knows cabbage cooked with pork, spinach and Swiss chard, radishes and fennels). His skills as an anatomist are shown when he dissects a bedbug. In his practice, the doctor’s uncanny diagnostic ability allows him to determine, just by looking at patients’ urine, the color of their clothes as well as the cause of their illness. His fees are exorbitant, and his cures consist mostly of laxatives and enemas. The first part of the poem ends with a summary of the doctor’s obscene theoretical creed expressed through a parody of medieval scholastic theses.

The *Macharonea medicinalis* is not the most original of the pre-Folenghian macaronic poems—at times, in fact, it blatantly plagiarizes earlier texts—and its scatological and indecent substance, although magnified, is certainly not distinctive.<sup>16</sup> The poem is, however, interesting because it contains a unique prose introduction to the readers, written in Italian, which will help us understand better the poem’s significance.

Solito era Sceuola iuris perito, come recita Valerio Maximo nel octauo libro al medemo capitolo, alchuna uolta per diuertir l’animo dali forensi negocii, iocare per breue spatio de tempo a la pila lusoria; et il sanctissimo Socrate transtularse cum piculi fanciuli; perhoché la natura, de tute le cosse curiosa genitrice, non sostiene alchuno essere paziente di continua fatica, et abenché, come dice il philosopho, ogni uirtude consiste in actione, niente di meno licito è alcuna uolta, et etiandio necessario, far intermissione in qualuncha preoccupato exercicio, et perhò recita il sulmonense Ouidio

“Quod caret alterna requie durabile non est:  
hec reparat uires fessaque membra leuat.”

Per la qual cossa, mosso per auctoritate de tanto poeta, non come temerario ma per dar dolce materia ale S.V. di qualche piaceuele recreatione, me è parso drizar a quelle questa humile mia et uulgar fantasia, acioché etiandio habiando piliato quello breue apiacere qual meritano questi miei friuoli uersi, possano comprendere le prefate S.V. la ciecha ignorantia che ogi di è appresso del inconstante et / temerario uulgo, et precipue cerca la nobile et diuina arte di medicina. . . . Questo facilmente si po comprendere considerando la misera conditione di questo nostro rude et presumptuoso medico, del qual in questi nostri rozi et inornati uersi hauemo ridiculamente a tractare, qual senza mai hauer aldito una minima propositione di medicina et mancho di philosophia . . . Veramente si extima un nouo Hippocrate, un secundo Galeno, o uero hauere l’anima di Auicenna. . . . Unde per tal causa, spesse fiate, magnifici S.: mi

muovo a sdegno et lamentomi fra mi stesso. . . . Ma se, forsi, cossa alchuna fusse scritta che paresse contro il debito deta, questo bisogna imponere al poetico furore. . . . Niente di meno, niuna cossa è deta qual non habia misterio in sé, et soto uelamento et colore poeticho habiamo precise et ueridicamente narrato la uita, progenie costumi, doctrina, et praticcha di questo tale ignorantissimo medico. (ll.168–69)

(The jurist Scaevola was accustomed, according to Valerius Maximus [VIII,8], to divert his mind from legal affairs by playing ball games for a short time, and the most holy Socrates used to pass the time with boys. For Nature, the careful mother of all things, does not allow one to endure continuous labor, and although, as Aristotle says, every virtue consists in action, nonetheless it is sometimes permissible, and even necessary, to have a respite from any demanding preoccupation. Thus Ovid of Sulmona says

“Work without alternating rest is not endurable:  
rest repairs one’s strength and lightens tired limbs.”

So, moved by the authority of the great poet, I have decided not in a vexatious spirit but in order to give your lordships some entertaining matter for your pleasant recreation, to direct to you this my humble and vulgar fantasy so that, having received that slight pleasure which my frivolous verses can bestow, your lordships may be able to understand the blind ignorance which is found these days among the fickle and restless mob, and which seeks out in particular the noble and divine art of medicine. . . . This can easily be understood by considering the wretched condition of this uneducated and presumptuous physician of whom I treat, mockingly, in my rough and unpolished verses, who, without ever having heard the slightest proposition of medicine and lacking in philosophy, . . . truly believes himself a new Hippocrates, or a second Galen, or claims to have the soul of Avicenna. . . . Therefore, magnificent lords, bear with me if I am moved to indignation, and do lament within myself. . . . But if perhaps I have written anything which, it may seem, ought not to have been said, it must be put down to poetic madness. . . . Nevertheless, nothing is said which does not have some concealed truth within it, and under the veil and color of poetry I have precisely and truthfully narrated the life, progeny, customs, doctrine, and practice of this most ignorant doctor.)<sup>17</sup>

In this preface the author not only introduces his subject matter, he also frames his work within a very specific cultural tradition. First of all, his “humble and vulgar fantasy” is sanctioned by classical authorities (Plato and Ovid) and justified, in harmony with the humanistic conventions of comic production, as a

diversion, a period of respite from the more serious concerns of life.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, and most importantly, this introduction clearly proposes the *Macharonea medicinalis* as a contribution, admittedly a facetious one, to the humanistic debate on the dignity of the arts, particularly on the value of medicine.<sup>19</sup> The preface follows a strictly humanistic rhetoric and carefully avoids any obscene matter, perhaps the only exception being the oblique reference to Plato's taste for young boys; nevertheless, a reversal is carried out through the use of Italian instead of Latin, the chosen language of scientific and scholarly speculation.

The old controversy regarding the value of the different arts, which dated back to classical times, had been rekindled in the Middle Ages by Petrarch's *Invectivae contra medicum*—which provoked a very stormy debate in its own time and became the theoretical model for any subsequent exchange on the subject throughout the Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> This text combines a violent, personal attack against a doctor who had proclaimed himself a philosopher with a theoretical inquiry concerning the value of medicine; ultimately it develops into a vigorous defense of poetry. Petrarch compares medicine to poetry and philosophy through a series of oppositions. The central contrast between the two arts, the one on which all other contrasts rest, is that medicine, like other mechanical arts, occupies itself with the mortal body, while poetry and philosophy, like all liberal arts, cure the immortal soul. Consequently, doctors are accused of being greedy for money and fame, while philosophers and poets, by definition, shy away from earthly glory, possessions, and concerns. Doctors want therefore to live in the cities, among the crowds, where all evils are to be found, while a contemplative mind seeks the solitude of the countryside.

In the passion of the vituperative attack, Petrarch cannot refrain from resorting to the popular lore concerning doctors that is at the core of Bartolotti's satire. Forgetting at times his lofty subject, he inserts references to doctors' involvement with excrements.

De omni enim materia loqui vultis, vestre professionis obliti que est, si nescis, urinas et que nominare pudor prohibet contemplari; nec pudet insultare his quibus virtutum atque anima cura est.<sup>21</sup>

(You want to talk about all subjects, oblivious of your profession, which consists, if you don't know it, in observing urine and other things which my decency forbids me from naming; and you are not ashamed to insult those whose care are virtues and the soul.)

Petrarch's philosophical writing and Bartolotti's *Macharonea* are two disparate texts, profoundly different in style, content, and purpose, and yet, I would argue, they share a common theme in their forceful attacks on two unlearned doctors. I would venture so far as to propose that Bartolotti's poem represents a symmetrical reversal of Petrarch's *Invectivae*. The latter work, written in Latin prose by a humanist and a poet, vituperatively abuses an ignorant doctor in particular and medicine in general, yet in the end it turns into a celebration of poetry. Conversely, the *Macharonea*, a poem written in an

artificial, vulgar language by a doctor, though it also focuses on an uneducated and presumptuous physician, is ultimately meant to celebrate “the noble and divine art of medicine.” On the one hand Petrarch defines the superiority of the poet/philosopher by underscoring his renunciation of the world of the flesh for the realm of the spirit. The body and its natural functions are sacrificed; they become absent and appear in the text only through the topos of *reticentia*. On the other hand, Bartolotti, by reversing Petrarch’s rhetoric of reticence into *amplificatio*, salvages and celebrates the joyous bawdy body, powerfully present in all its forms and functions, and with it he acclaims medicine, the discipline pertaining to the body.

I believe the second part of the *Macharonea* corroborates my interpretation of this work as a deliberate satire of Petrarch’s *Invectivae*. The fourth and final book of the *Invectivae* is almost exclusively dedicated to a celebration of the virtues of the country, which is seen as the perfect ambience for intellectual pursuits; city life, however, where all evils abound, is forcefully condemned. In the second part of the *Macharonea* our doctor, almost as though he were following Petrarch’s guidance, decides to move to the countryside. The new environment, however, is not conducive to the solitary and studious life advocated by Petrarch, and our doctor leads a lustier existence than he did in the city, becoming involved with multiple partners and even bestiality.

Through a consistent reflection and reversal of Petrarch’s work, Bartolotti articulates a fundamental critique of the different aspects of Petrarchism which dominated the culture of his time. Bartolotti’s *Macharonea* is thus “medicinalis” (medicinal) not only because it considers the art of medicine, but also because, contrary to the contentious invective, it delivers the curative power of laughter and brings joy, recreation, and health to its readers.<sup>22</sup> Above all, however, it is medicinal because the poem’s monstrous language, in consonance with its etymological root (“monstrare,” to show), reconstitutes the fragmented and scattered body of the Petrarchan imagination, displaying it in all its entirety and glory.

## Notes

1. For a brief history of the coexistence of vulgate, Latin, and dialects in Italian literature, see Cesare Segre, “Polemica linguistica ed espressionismo dialettale nella letteratura italiana,” in *Lingua, stile e società* (1974; Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), pp. 397–426.
2. For a detailed analysis of macaronic Latin, see Ugo Enrico Paoli, *Il latino maccheronico* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1959); Ivano Paccagnella, *Le macaronie padovane: Tradizione e lingua* (Padua: Antenore, 1979); and Mirko Tavoni, *Storia della lingua italiana: Il Quattrocento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), pp. 159–67.
3. For Paoli’s discussion of macaronic Latin as “linguistic monster,” see *Il latino maccheronico*, pp. 1–52. In these pages Paoli analyzes at length Tifi Odasi’s expression

"facit tremare pilastros" (he makes pillars tremble) as exemplary of the "monstrous" mechanisms at play in macaronic Latin. Comparing Tifi Odasi's sentence with its correct Latin equivalent, "efficit ut ipsae antae tremant," Paoli points out all the deliberate mistakes introduced in macaronic poetry. These mistakes can be generally characterized as the kind of errors that someone who habitually speaks Italian and has a scanty knowledge of Latin would make when writing Latin. Specifically, Tifi Odasi translates the Italian structure literally into Latin, where such a structure is inadmissible. Moreover, he introduces a morphological error by using the Italian "tremare" rather than its correct Latin form, "tremere." Finally, with the word "pilastros," Tifi inserts both a morphological and a lexical error. "Pilastrum," in fact, is not a Latin word, and even if it were it would be, like all words ending in "-trum" and "-strum," neuter in gender, while the form "pilastros" is masculine.

4. "Invece di promuovere lo stile umile a rappresentativo di contenuti sublimi, hanno piegato lo stile sublime a rappresentare contenuti umili." Cesare Segre, "La tradizione macaronica da Folengo a Gadda (e oltre)," in *Cultura letteraria e tradizione popolare in Teofilo Folengo: atti del Convegno di studi promosso dall'Accademia virgiliana e dal comitato Mantova-Padania 77, Mantova 15-17 ottobre 1977* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), p. 67.
5. Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 61. It should be noted that medical books written in Italian existed from the middle of the fifteenth century, but they mostly are either translations of Latin texts or books of "popular" medicine that contain therapeutical, cosmetic, and magical recipes. See Tavoni, *Storia della lingua italiana*, pp. 29-33.
6. David Williams, writing about the language of the monstrous in *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), distinguishes between "monstrare" (to show forth) and "(re)praesentare" (to represent), and he points out that "the etymological origin of the monster contains within it its intellectual kinship to heuristic understanding," p. 4.
7. On the connotations of the word macaronic, see Paoli, *Il latino maccheronico*, pp. 1-6.
8. See Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 141.
9. Barbara Spackman, "Inter musam et ursam moritur: Folengo and the Gaping 'Other' Mouth," in *Refiguring Woman: Perspective on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 20.
10. See William Schubach, "Doctor Parma's Medicinal Macaronic: Poem by Bartolotti, Pictures by Giorgione and Titian," *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 49 (1978): 147-91.
11. Schubach, "Doctor Parma's Medicinal Macaronic," pp. 158-59.
12. For a detailed summary of the *Macharonea medicinalis*, see Schubach, "Doctor Parma's Medicinal Macaronic," pp. 151-55. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.
13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968), p. 26.
14. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 29.
15. On Petrarch's description of Laura, see Robert Durling, "Petrarch's 'Giovane donna

- sotto un verde lauro," *Modern Language Notes* 86 (1971): 1–20; John Freccero, "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics," *Diacritics* 5 (Spring 1975): 34–40; and Nancy Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Winter 1981): 265–79.
16. For specific echoes of previous macaronic texts in the *Macharonea*, see Schupbach's notes to Bartolotti's poem in "Doctor Parma's Medicinal Macaronic," and Paccagnella, *Le macaronee padovane*, pp. 60–61.
  17. Translated by Schupbach, "Doctor Parma's Medicinal Macaronic," pp. 150–51.
  18. See Ezio Raimondi, "Presentazione," in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola—Clizia* (Milan: Mursia, 1984), p. 26.
  19. See Eugenio Garin, ed., *La disputa delle arti nel Quattrocento* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1947), and Coluccio Salutati, *De nobilitate legum at medicinae*, ed. and trans. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1947).
  20. On invective as a genre, see V. Vismara, *L'invettiva, arma preferita dagli umanisti nelle lotte private, nelle polemiche letterarie, politiche e religiose* (Milan, 1900), and Pier Giorgio Ricci, "La tradizione dell'invettiva tra il Medioevo e l'Umanesimo," *Lettere italiane* 26 (1974): 405–14.
  21. Francesco Petrarca, *Invective contra medicum. Testo latino e volgarizzamento di Ser Domenico Silvestri*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1978), pp. 34–35.
  22. On the therapeutical power of laughter, see Raymond C. La Charité, "Rabelais: The Book as Therapy," *Medicine and Literature*, ed. Enid Rhodes Peschel (New York: Neale Watson Academic Publications, 1980), pp. 11–17; and Bakhtin, who observes: "Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great internal censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, fear of the prohibitions, of the past, of power" (*Rabelais*, p. 94).



## CHAPTER 10

### *Girolamo Parabosco's L'Hermafrodito: An Irregular Commedia Regolare*

SUZANNE MAGNANINI



In Girolamo Parabosco's comedy *L'Hermafrodito* (1549), there are no transgender characters nor even any instances of cross-dressing. Behind the title lies an unwieldy play that incorporates some twenty characters into what seems a hybrid of all other Renaissance comedies. During the five rather complicated acts an old man will be mocked for his foolish interest in a young woman, a necromancer will attempt to trick and be tricked himself, a courtesan will arrange for two lovers to meet, and a double scene of agnition will permit two supposed orphans to discover their true identities.<sup>1</sup> Where then, we may ask, can we find the creature of the title, and what relation does its monstrous morphology have to the comedy?

Parabosco confines the double-sexed monster to the space of the prologue, where the creature's blended nature becomes a symbol for the text's irregular form.<sup>2</sup> The personified figure of the Prologue informs the audience that the title refers to the monstrous nature of the text: this is not an original piece born of the author's labor, but instead the product of textual incest generated by the union of a brother, *Il Viluppo* (1547), and a sister, *La Notte* (1546), two comedies which Parabosco combined in 1549 to create *L'Hermafrodito*. While critics always note this explanation of the title, none has gone on to examine the complicated way in which a monstrous body comes to stand for the text, even though the figure of the hermaphrodite occupies more than half of the prologue.<sup>3</sup> The Prologue adopts the language of sexual reproduction, and more specifically of monstrous generation, in order to describe the act of literary production that yielded this abnormal offspring. In the description of its birth, in the specifications of this particular type of hermaphrodite, and in the appeal

that this monster be spared the fate of many others and not be burned, the Prologue adheres to the teratological theories set forth in Renaissance medical and philosophical treatises.

In the early modern period as today, the monstrous body was in a sense a text that existed in order to be read and interpreted.<sup>4</sup> In the year preceding the publication of *L'Hermaphrodito*, the Florentine humanist Benedetto Varchi began his *Lezione della generazione dei mostri* with an etymology that revealed the portentous function of monsters: "As to the definition of the word *monster*, it is said [to come from] *to show*, that is to signify—or demonstrate, signify, and announce—some future thing."<sup>5</sup> During the sixteenth century, this belief in the prophetic meaning of monsters on the part of Luther and other Reformation thinkers encouraged the publication of new editions of classical works on teratomancy, such as Julius Obsequen's *Prodigiorum liber*, as well as new works such as Conrad Lycosthenes' *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon* (1557) and Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires Prodigieuses* (1560).<sup>6</sup> Catholic readers also found this new genre of prodigy books fascinating, and contributed to their popularity.<sup>7</sup> As an Aristotelian, Varchi tends to downplay the prophetic role of the monster, declaring further on in his lesson, "as to the definition of the thing, taking it generally and in its broadest meaning, all those things are called monsters which occur out of the usual and common natural order, in whatever way they occur and for whatever reason."<sup>8</sup> For Varchi, Nature was not the only force capable of engendering monsters. Indeed, any human endeavor in which a creator did not produce that which he had intended was to be considered monstrous. Varchi explains that when "a doctor gives medicine to a sick person to cure him and kills him or doesn't cure him, that is a monstrous thing; and likewise if a painter, wanting to paint a portrait, doesn't know how to make the picture resemble the subject; or a blacksmith wanting to make a handle made a knife instead, and this goes for all others in the same way."<sup>9</sup>

In Parabosco's lifetime, monsters—and hermaphrodites were included in this category—possessed a multiplicity of meanings and elicited a variety of reactions in those who viewed them. Monstrosity was in the eye of the beholder. Intersexuality could be understood as a terrifying sign of God's wrath, and it was often interpreted as a symbol for sodomy.<sup>10</sup> Under the gaze of physicians and anatomists, hermaphrodites were no longer prophetic bodies but interruptions in the natural order, jokes of Nature (*lusus naturae*), or Nature's mistakes. And yet despite these negative associations, the hermaphrodite's anatomical rarity inspired the positive sensations of awe and wonder. The anatomist Realdo Colombo, for example, enthusiastically exclaimed in his *De re anatomica* (1559), "among the many astonishing and rare things which I have observed at different times in the structure of the human body, I consider that nothing is more astonishing, nothing rarer, than what I have diligently investigated about a nature neither male nor female."<sup>11</sup> In Parabosco's prologue the figure of the hermaphrodite will assume all of these identities: it will symbolize sin,

disrupt literary taxonomies, and lure the audience to contemplate its marvelous form.<sup>12</sup>

In this essay, I depart from the premise that as a monster, Parabosco's *L'Hermaphrodito* stands before us, like it did before a Venetian public, as a sign to be deciphered. In the first section, I interpret the figure of the hermaphrodite through a close reading of the prologue. In order to comprehend how the Prologue reads the hermaphrodite's body, I examine the teratological theories that inform his discourse. Through this recuperative reading, I demonstrate that the hermaphrodite embodies Parabosco's anxiety about the abnormal process of composition that produced the work. In the second section, I discuss the use of the prologue in the genre of *commedia regolare* as a locus for discussions of dramatic theory, so as to be able to analyze the implications of confining the irregular body to this particular meta-textual space. In the third and final section, I reread the hermaphrodite in terms of modern theories of the monstrous, revealing it as a symbol that embodies the tension between the *teatro popolare* and the *commedia regolare* in sixteenth-century Venice.

### A Monstrous Birth

The Prologue opens the play by excusing his appearance. In fact, he is not wearing the typical golden toga (toga d'oro) nor the classical laurel wreath (ghirlanda di lauro).<sup>13</sup> He laughingly explains that he does not don the traditional toga because he has always had an adversarial relationship with gold. Unlike his unworthy colleagues, he refrains from wearing the laurel, an honor he believes should be reserved for only the greatest poets. As the prologue unfolds, it will become clear that this refusal of classical attire reflects the author's own reluctance to completely adopt the classical model of comedy. After these opening comments, the Prologue introduces the work:

The name of this comedy is Hermaphrodite. The author has given her this name for two reasons, one, because he wanted to make sure that she be pleasing in some parts to the world, bearing the name of those who, because they are able to serve both sexes, are held so dear by both women and men, and extremely cherished. But really to tell the truth, I believe that she was born this way due to the sin of those who created her, because they were a brother and a sister. The one is called Il Viluppo and the other La Notte. Don't think though that she is entirely half-male and half-female, for you would be mistaken. She does not have any other resemblance to the male, which is Il Viluppo, than just that small thing which can make her be known as male. It is so small that the women [in the audience] who have quite perfect vision will just about be able to make it out. For this reason, the author is not yet too sure that she [the comedy] will give them much pleasure. She has a much bigger part

of the female, which is La Notte. . . . I'll stop here. Soon someone will come who will make you laugh and will crack you up. It only remains for me to tell you that, in case this poor hermaphrodite comes to your houses, don't burn him like a person who deserves the flame. He has neither blame nor sin for the incest of his parents, even though it is his lot to shamefully manifest it [the incest]. And would to heaven that all instances of incest were made visible and revealed to the world through similar monsters.<sup>14</sup>

A number of general assumptions about monsters inform and shape the Prologue's argument: sinful conceptions produce monstrous progeny; the monster is a physical manifestation of the parents' sin; and the monster itself is ultimately innocent. He also engages the taxonomies of hermaphrodites similar to those found in anatomical discourses. Yet in order to comprehend the metaphor in which the hermaphroditic body represents the text, the public did not need to possess a background in Aristotelian theories of generation or an extensive knowledge of the contemporary teratological texts. The Prologue assumes only a superficial knowledge of scientific theories of monstrous generation, and he refrains from integrating into his discourse what would have been specialized knowledge. While it is impossible to ascertain precisely the scientific savvy of the author and his public, what we know of Parabosco's intellectual development and literary pursuits does not seem to indicate an exceptional interest in scientific matters.<sup>15</sup> Since modern readers may lack even this basic background, I will cite from Renaissance philosophical and medical texts in my analysis in order to clarify the Prologue's reasoning. I am not, however, suggesting that Parabosco specifically quotes any of the authors I mention below—merely that in a general way he incorporates similar concepts into his prologue.

Renaissance treatises on monsters offer myriad causes for monstrous births, including the wrath or glory of God, the narrowness of the womb, rotten or corrupt seed, and the maternal imagination.<sup>16</sup> While medical and philosophical texts tended to blame the birth of hermaphrodites on unbalanced humors and defective seed, the Prologue describes the generation of this hermaphrodite in terms of the theory that interpreted monstrous births as the physical manifestations of and testimony to the sins of the parents.<sup>17</sup> He says of this comedy, of this hermaphrodite, "I believe that she was born this way due to the sin of those who created her, because they were a brother and a sister."<sup>18</sup> At the end of his monologue, the Prologue underscores the sinful origins and signifying function of this monstrous birth, stating, "it is his lot to shamefully manifest it [the incest]. And would to heaven that all instances of incest were made visible and revealed to the world through similar monsters."<sup>19</sup> Italian, and more generally European, Renaissance culture interpreted monstrous births not only as portents, but also as physical testimony to past sinful events.

The Prologue's assertions that the heavens ordained this monstrous birth in order to reveal the parents' sins mirrors the theory posited by Pierre Boaistuau

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in his *Histoires Prodigieuses* (1560). Boaistuau states, "It is quite certain that most often the monstrous creatures arise from the judgment, justice, chastisement, and curse of God, who allows the fathers and mothers to produce such abominations, in horror of their sin, because they rush about indifferently like brute beasts, or their appetite guides them, without respect or observance of age, place, time or other laws of nature."<sup>20</sup> Even in works of a more secular tone, authors point to the transgression of established sexual norms, to "abbracciamenti illiciti," illicit embraces, as a cause of monstrous birth. The Swiss physician Levinus Lemnius, whose *De gli occulti miracoli* (1553) enjoyed wide circulation in Latin and Italian, associates the birth of hermaphrodites with a "sinistro e non usato congiungimento." He explains, "this monstrous and infamous birth, is sometimes born from the wicked and uncusomary union of the man and woman, as when the woman is on top and the man on the bottom, which is also greatly contrary to the health of the body and especially when the man has eaten too much."<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the hermaphroditic body functions as an apt metaphor for this text in which both the male *Il Viluppo* and the female *La Notte* coexist, but we may wonder why the Prologue, whose task it is to gain the audience's acceptance of this hermaphrodite, insists on the sinful nature of the generative act that conceived it. One would assume that the underscoring of the shameful origins of the work would cause the audience to reject it; however, exactly the opposite occurs. In revealing that the union of a brother and sister produced the monstrous offspring, the Prologue creates a genealogy for the comedy that absolves both Parabosco the author and his *Hermaphrodito* from any sin by displacing all culpability onto these incestuous siblings. In this family tree, Parabosco occupies a privileged position as the grandfather of the hermaphrodite: he remains the ultimate source of the work, albeit one generation removed, while avoiding any blame for its production.

The author, however, is not the only one to benefit from this genealogy, as the hermaphrodite is depicted as an innocent child who suffers unjustly for the sins of his parents. At the end of his argument, the Prologue declares the innocence of the hermaphrodite and beseeches the audience not to burn this poor monster for the incest of his parents. With these words the Prologue reminds the audience that early modern societies sanctioned infanticide only in the case of monstrous newborns deemed to be of demonic or bestial origin. Those recognizable as human, no matter how deformed, were considered innocent of the sins of the parents and were baptized.<sup>22</sup>

In describing the conception of the *Hermaphrodito* as a sinful, incestuous act of generation, Parabosco reveals his own preoccupation with having transgressed the norms of literary production, albeit in a comical way. Imitation played an important role in the composition of comedies, and dramatists often recycled classical plots, renewing them with original variations and additions. Parabosco perverts this practice by imitating himself instead of a classical authority. He reuses elements from one work to the next with very little innovative rewriting or editing. His literary corpus suffers from a type of textual

inbreeding that has yielded an exceptionally complicated genetic history. The combination of *La Notte* and *Il Viluppo* produced *L'Hermafrodito*; a novella recounted by Cucca in *L'Hermafrodito* becomes novella XV in *I Diporti*;<sup>23</sup> the wooing scene in the first act of *L'Hermafrodito* differs only slightly from that in *I Contenti*.<sup>24</sup> Since very few sixteenth-century critical assessments of his work have been uncovered to date, it is difficult to know how Parabosco's peers perceived this lack of originality. Modern scholars, however, have uniformly denounced Parabosco's lack of imagination and the resulting repetitiousness of his comedies.<sup>25</sup>

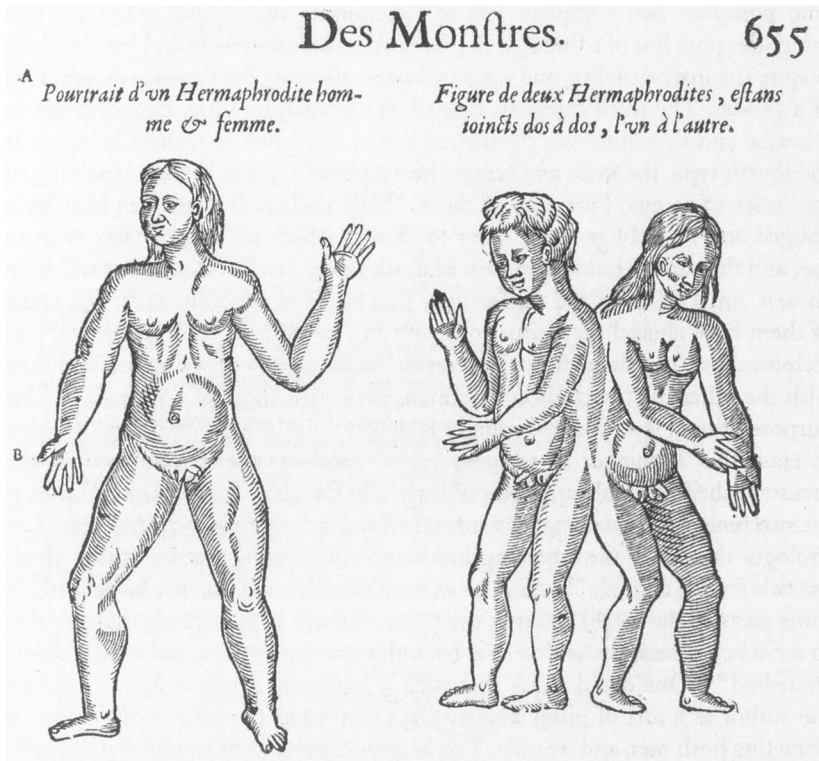
By its double nature, the hermaphrodite confounds taxonomy, standing between male and female. The hermaphrodite demands either the abolition of existing categories that are incapable of containing its monstrous intersexuality or the creation of an altogether new category. Early modern scientists reacted to the transgression of anatomical order such bodies presented by creating separate categories for them. In describing the form of the comedy, the Prologue adheres to the existing taxonomies of monsters. He lingers, as do many early modern physicians, over the description of the hermaphroditic body and specifies the exact ratio of male to female. This being a comedy, the Prologue does not miss the opportunity to joke that the women in the audience will be less satisfied by the "Hermafrodito" since it is only a small part male. He warns the audience: "Don't think though that she is entirely half-male and half-female, for you would be mistaken. She does not have any other resemblance to the male, which is *Il Viluppo*, than just that small thing which can make her be known as male. It is so small that the women [in the audience] who have quite perfect vision will just about be able to make it out. For this reason, the author is not yet too sure that she [the comedy] will give them much pleasure. She has a much bigger part of the female, which is *La Notte*."<sup>26</sup> On the literal level, this description clarifies for the audience how Parabosco patched together the two plays, and in what proportions, in order to create the new comedy. Parabosco replicates this male to female ratio grammatically by referring to the work for the majority of the prologue as "la comedia," thus requiring the feminine pronoun "ella," or she, as well as feminine adjectival endings. Only in the last few lines does the Prologue refer to the work as "l'hermafrodito" and then use the masculine pronoun "egli," or he.

The Prologue's precise description of the ratio of male to female in *L'Hermafrodito* recalls scientific classifications of hermaphrodites, and in doing so, recasts the comedy's bitextuality as a titillating bisexuality. Ambroise Paré's *On Monsters and Marvels* (1573) provides a taxonomy of hermaphrodites founded on four phenotypes: the first he calls the male hermaphrodite, who possesses a functioning penis and secondary, less functional, female organs; the second is the female hermaphrodite, who possesses a vagina and undergoes menses but also has a partially functioning penis; the third is the true hermaphrodite, possessing complete male and female organs that are not sexually functional; and the fourth category is the male and female hermaphrodite

who possesses two complete sets of functioning sex organs. The first two categories pose less of a threat to the distinction between male and female, since despite the intersexuality, one sex dominates, allowing for the easy designation of a gender. The third category, that of true hermaphrodites, cannot perform sexually, and therefore was considered a sort of neuter or neutral being. It is the fourth type, the male and female hermaphrodite, that is most troubling to the order of things. Paré says of these, "both ancient and modern laws have obliged and still oblige these latter to choose which sex organs they wish to use, and they are forbidden on pain of death to use any but those they will have chosen, on account of the misfortunes that could result from such. For some of them have abused their situation, with the result that, through mutual and reciprocal use, they take their pleasures first with one set of sex organs and then with the other; first with those of a man, then with those of a woman."<sup>27</sup> The purpose of such laws and taxonomies is to neutralize the power of the monster, to erase the "harbinger of category crisis"<sup>28</sup> and rewrite its body within the preestablished rational categories of male and female.<sup>29</sup> Parabosco's monster is a sexual renegade who manages to resist revision by ignoring such strictures. The Prologue disregards the taboos against bisexuality, stating that the author chose the title for the comedy "because he wanted to make sure that she be pleasing in some parts to the world, bearing the name of those who, because they are able to serve both sexes, are held so dear by both women and men, and are extremely cherished."<sup>30</sup> One could argue that such a statement serves only to implicate the author as a sort of pimp who displays this hermaphrodite in the hopes of attracting both men and women. The hermaphrodite itself would also be guilty of taking pleasure indiscriminately. In this scenario, would not the audience also be guilty, inasmuch as it is composed of both men and women who will derive pleasure from both the male and female natures of *L'Hermafrodito*? The audience's complicity in this transgression of sexual codes ensures the acceptance of the work, since any accusation would be self-incriminating.

### *An Irregular Commedia Regolare*

By the time Parabosco embarked on his literary career, the genre of *commedia regolare* or *erudita* was well established. Comedies were considered "regular" and "erudite" when the plots were based on the Latin comedies of Terence and Plautus, and the characters were urban dwellers who spoke a literary (Tuscan) Italian. By the 1540s, a number of Italian comedies, like Machiavelli's *La Mandragola* (1518) and Bibbiena's *La Calandria* (1513), stood alongside their Latin predecessors as models worthy of imitation. The plots often center around one or two characters who pursue the object of their desire, with the remaining characters filling out the plot by helping or hindering the romantic quest. The final resolution of the plot often depends on scenes of agnition, in which the revelation of a character's true identity removes any of the remaining obstacles to the inevitable happy ending. The comedies develop through the



Hermaphrodites from Ambroise Paré's treatise *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (in *Les Oeuvres*, eleventh edition, Paris, 1652). Courtesy of the Biblioteca Trivulziana.

course of five acts, follow the notions of unity of time and space expressed in Aristotle's *Poetics*,<sup>31</sup> and are preceded by a prologue. In one of the few moments in which a character speaks directly to the audience, the Prologue introduces the comedy by describing the setting and/or summarizing the plot. He engages the audience, asks for its full attention, and promises a fine performance. The Latin comedies had established the prologue as a privileged locus of critical debate separate from the action of the comedy, and Renaissance playwrights continued this practice.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, sixteenth-century prologues contributed to the codification of the *commedia regolare*, since authors either explicitly expressed their theory of comedy in them or revealed it implicitly as they attempted to defend themselves against critics.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, as a meta-textual space in which the author justifies any variations from the *commedia regolare*, the prologue often betrays the author's anxiety about his work. Richard Andrews observes that "certain prologues give the impression of a dramatist looking over his shoulder with some apprehension at the pedantic objections either anticipated or already received from some spectators."<sup>34</sup> By confining the hermaphrodite to the prologue, Parabosco de-



mands that his audience confront the relationship of the monstrous body to normative theoretical discourse that traditionally occupied the same space. Parabosco's prologue anticipates the reactions of his critics who might view the composition process that generated the comedy as sinful. The Prologue offers a justification for the irregularities of *L'Hermafrodito* in order to argue for its innocence and to appeal for its acceptance while exculpating Parabosco the author. The comedy can also be considered a hermaphrodite, a monstrous hybrid, because it unites two distinct types of comedy in one text, the *commedia regolare* and the *teatro popolare*. I contend that the figure of the hermaphrodite can also be interpreted as a symbol of Parabosco's anxiety over having deviated from the genre of the *commedia regolare* in his use of language and devices typical of the *teatro popolare*.

Venetian dramatists in particular had reason to look anxiously over their shoulders as they wrote their comedies, since conforming to the rules of the *commedia regolare* meant rejecting the increasingly popular local tradition of comedies in dialect. Andrews notes that many dramatists felt torn between the more respectable genre of *commedia regolare* and the traditional dialect farces: "The Venetian comedies which were published in the 1540s and 1550s all show signs of tension between on one hand the pressure to imitate literary models (which by now included the more successful Italian comedies, as well as Plautus and Terence) and on the other hand a reluctance to ignore a growing theatrical repertoire which was in demand, and which was based on the discoveries and contributions of Ruzante and the local tradition."<sup>35</sup> A few of Parabosco's contemporaries, such as Angelo Beolco (Il Ruzante) and Andrea Calmo, enthusiastically embraced the use of dialect and rejected many of the formal structures of the *commedia regolare*. Ruzante, for example, sought to represent the peasant class, whose passions and emotions, as well as language, stood in stark contrast to those of the educated elite of the cities.<sup>36</sup> Calmo's comedies are unique in that he utilized a variety of dialects and languages (Venetian, Bergamasque, Paduan, German, Turkish, and a Greek-Venetian dialect) to create farcical plots brimming with "burle," or practical jokes.<sup>37</sup>

In broad terms, Parabosco conformed to the rules of the *commedia regolare* genre. He utilized a standard literary Italian for a majority of the comedy; he reworked plots based on Plautus and Terence as well as contemporary comedies like Bibbiena's *La Calandria*, and he adopted the classical structure of five acts and a prologue. Most critics, however, do not categorize his comedies as *regolare* without first making some qualifying remarks. Some critics merely note Parabosco's use of certain thematic elements more common to the popular theater of Ruzante or Calmo,<sup>38</sup> while others view his comedies as embodying the tensions between the regular comedies and the *teatro popolare*.<sup>39</sup> Parabosco's decision to weave language and themes common to the popular tradition into his otherwise regular comedy was undoubtedly determined in part by the public's predilection for plurilinguism and farce. While the *commedia regolare* bestowed a certain amount of literary prestige on the author, the *teatro popolare* assured

the approval of Venetian audiences. In a letter he wrote to Calmo, one detects Parabosco's respect for plurilinguistic comedies and his admiration of Calmo's success: "Are you not now with your performance giving Venice that very merry and admirable pleasure that she desires most? I seem to see you on stage, making slaves of all of the people who see and hear you. I can hear from here [in Piacenza] the noise of the applause that the people give you. Scaling walls where you are, breaking doors, passing through canals, falling from heights, the people themselves risk a thousand deaths just to be able to enjoy the sweetness of your words for a single hour."<sup>40</sup> Even such clamorous success could not persuade Parabosco to completely abandon the literary conventions of the aulic canon. Instead he created a hybrid by grafting elements typical of the *teatro popolare*—such as popular rhymes and songs, plurilinguism, and an abundance of "burle"—onto a *commedia regolare*.

Popular "lines, little stanzas, rustic courtship sonnets, proverbs [and] epigrams"<sup>41</sup> pepper the dialogue of *L'Hermafrodito*. In Act I, for example, Miniato, an old man in love with the young courtesan Polissena, dances as his servant Magagna serenades the girl with a song. Magagna shakes his master's purse and sings

Questo è quel suono che fa saltare  
giovane e vecchie, gagliarde e stanche  
e con misura fa ballare

(This is the sound that makes the young and old, the hearty and the tired, jump, and with rhythm makes them dance).<sup>42</sup>

Giuseppe Bianchini suggests that these lines were actually part of a popular *canzone*, or song, and that the lyric and music would have been familiar to the audience.<sup>43</sup> In Act II, when the drunk bravo Trabucca boasts that he possesses a scorpion poised to sting, the servant Cucca mocks his bombast with an obscene rhyme:

Et ho prigion un cuco,  
che va per ogni buco  
e quando il vien da spasso  
e 'l porta el capo basso

(I have imprisoned a cuckoo that goes in each hole, and when he comes back from going about, he carries his head low).<sup>44</sup>

The integration of popular songs and rhymes into the dialogue represents only one deviation from the aulic model.

At other moments in the comedy, Parabosco adopts a sort of watered-down version of Calmo's plurilinguism. The character Rottiglio speaks almost exclusively in Spanish. In Act II, he swears he would kill a thousand men (*hombres*) for his love Polissena. She mocks him saying that killing a thousand shadows (*ombre*) would be an easy task.<sup>45</sup> In another scene, Parabosco creates a

linguistic pastiche. Trabucca drunkenly mutters a mixture of Italian, Latin, and gibberish. His speech is so muddled that upon hearing him another character exclaims, "Are you speaking German?"<sup>46</sup> While it was common practice in Renaissance comedy to have characters speak a macaronic Latin when mocking doctors or lawyers, in this scene Trabucca's confused Latin phrases are the ramblings of a drunk, inserted into the dialogue for comic effect; in no way are they necessary to develop the plot or define his character. In these two scenes, the comedy arises from the linguistic confusion caused by the simultaneous use of two or more languages on stage, not from the action itself.

Parabosco deviates further from the norms of the *commedia regolare* in his unorthodox use of *novelle* and the practical jokes ("burle" or "beffe") common to them. Comic *novelle* in the Boccaccian tradition had long provided dramatists with plots involving "burle" that could be adapted successfully for the stage. Parabosco, however, does not rewrite *novelle*; rather he inserts them into his plays as narrative monologues. For example, in Act III of *L'Hermafrodito*, Parabosco interrupts the action of the plot with a novella narrated by the servant Cucca. Although entertaining, the tale is completely extraneous to the action.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Parabosco prefers to use "burle" in addition to, instead of as a basis for, the main plot. Burle were also characteristic of the *commedia regolare*, but Parabosco utilizes them in such abundance that they overwhelm the central story line, causing his comedies to more closely resemble the farces of popular theater. More often than not, the victim of these tricks is a character common to many of Parabosco's comedies: a foolish old man humiliated on stage by clever servants.<sup>48</sup> Most likely in response to his critics, Parabosco defends his use of "burle" in the prologue to *Il Viluppo*. The prologue is actually in the form of a dialogue between Lucretio and Ortensio, who are both searching for the Venetian residence where one of Parabosco's comedies is to be recited. After summarizing the plot of the comedy, Lucretio observes, "a thousand practical jokes and infinite mishaps occur in the plot."<sup>49</sup> He defends this practice, stating, "that one can bear, or rather one is pleased, even though it will displease some, when the author grafts some practical jokes onto the story, on the condition that the main plot remains clear and distinct."<sup>50</sup> Parabosco fails to take his own advice, and the large number of "burle" in the *Hermafrodito* makes it difficult to follow the plot and threatens the comprehension of the work much more than in *La Notte* and *Il Viluppo*.<sup>51</sup>

### A Crisis of Category

In the early modern collective consciousness, humans marked by sexual ambiguity symbolized both a sort of perfect unity, a transcendence of the binary system of sexual difference, and a challenge to the very same system. While up to this point I have emphasized the deconstructive power of the hermaphrodite, it must be noted that in certain contexts "the androgyne signifies, not the existence of two sexes in one being, but rather the transcendence of the oppositions and

metaphysical limitations that maleness and femaleness signify. In the monster tradition hermaphrodite is not a sexual, but an ontological phenomenon.<sup>52</sup> For example, some authors thought that the Hebrews believed the prelapsarian Adam to have been a hermaphrodite, similar to Plato's androgyne.<sup>53</sup> But as we have seen, the Renaissance teratological theories that inform the prologue considered hermaphrodites to be monsters that threatened to deconstruct, not transcend, categories.

In his study on the monstrous and monstrosity, Georges Canguilhem asserts that the "very existence of monsters throws doubts on life's ability to teach us order."<sup>54</sup> While all monsters have the potential to deconstruct categories and rational schema, the hermaphrodite is an especially disturbing figure because its monstrosity lies in a genital deformation. David Williams describes this power in his study on the medieval monster:

Genital deformation, either effected directly through the representation of abnormal organs or indirectly through anomalies in sexual phenomena, constitutes a monster of identity of the most profound sort. Selfhood, social structure—indeed our very sense of logical reality—depend on this fundamental distinction between male and female. When it disappears or is confused, the necessary distinctions between all things evaporate with it, and the rational structures of the real begin to collapse and meld into one another.<sup>55</sup>

By employing these modern notions of the hermaphrodite as a "harbinger of category crisis,"<sup>56</sup> we can uncover yet another layer of meaning in the prologue.

While the figure of the hermaphrodite functions on one level to describe the comedy's origins, we can also read the monster as a symbol for the crisis of genre, or crisis of literary categories, that Parabosco and other Venetian dramatists faced. Just as the hermaphroditic body confounds the distinction between male and female, Parabosco's comedy refutes the boundary and enclosure of the *commedia regolare* by occasionally slipping over the line into *teatro popolare*.<sup>57</sup> Just as the hermaphrodite of the prologue is predominantly female, being only in a small part male, *L'Hermaphrodito* is predominantly a *commedia regolare*, being only in small parts *teatro popolare*.<sup>58</sup>

Parabosco's *L'Hermaphrodito* reminds us that the Renaissance monstrous body did not necessarily represent only that which was "other" and horrifying, or that which must be rejected. The monster occupied a space of intense attraction/repulsion, possessing a seductive power that lured the curious to gaze on it in wonder. As a reader who was drawn to this relatively obscure comedy by its titillating title, I can easily imagine the sense of anticipation the audience felt as it waited (in vain) for the double-sexed monster to take the stage. Parabosco successfully manipulates the monstrous figure in order to argue for the acceptance of his work and justify the comedy's form because the monster remains a ghost, something conjured up but incorporeal. The Prologue can safely joke about the bisexual possibilities of the hermaphrodite, about its

abilities to please men and women, because the monster never leaves the bounds of the prologue and never appears on stage. Parabosco's monstrous metaphor functions so well because we the audience are never required to actually face the "other." When the Prologue pulls back the curtain, we are confronted not with a deformed body but with a comedy, whose irregularities have already been explained away.

### Notes

1. Giuseppe Bianchini criticizes the derivative nature of Parabosco's comedies, arguing "Le commedie del Parabosco raggirantisi intorno ad un intrigo stesso e intorno agli stessi caratteri, discendono dalla commedia latina indirettamente; attraversano, rubando e imitando, *La Calandria*, spigolano qualche po' dall'Aretino; tal volta si accostano al *Decameron*." (Parabosco's comedies, revolving around one plot and the same characters, descend indirectly from Latin comedy; robbing and imitating, they pass through the *Calandria* [by Bibbiena], and glean something from Aretino; now and then they approach the *Decameron*.) In "Girolamo Parabosco, scrittore e organista del secolo XVI," *Miscellanea di Storia Veneta*, Serie II, Tomo VI (1899), p. 388. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. By "prologue" (lowercase) I mean the text of the monologue that precedes the actual comedy; by "Prologue" (uppercase) I mean the personified figure who recites this monologue.
3. Most critics merely mention the fact that the comedy is called *L'Hermafrodito* because Parabosco combined *La Notte* and *Il Viluppo* to produce the work. See Giorgio Padoan, *La commedia rinascimentale veneta 1433–1565* (Verona: Neri Pozza, 1989), p. 201. Bianchini seems a bit more interested in the subject, and he reprints a good portion of the prologue in his study; however, he limits his observations to commenting that the prologue is a "curiosa giustificazione e spiegazione del commediografo" (a curious justification and explanation by the author), "Girolamo Parabosco," p. 343.
4. For a comprehensive study of how the body of a particular monster (the monster of Ravenna) was interpreted, and its image disseminated through broadsheets and prodigy books, see Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
5. "Quanto alla diffinitione della voce Mostro e detto dal mostrare, cioè è, significare—quasi che egli dimotri [*sic*], significhi ed annunzi—alcuna cosa futura o buona o rea che ella sia." Bendetto Varchi, *Opere*, 2 vols. (Trieste, 1858), 2:662. Varchi presented this lesson to the Florentine Academy in July 1548. The lesson *Della generazione de' mostri* appeared for the first time in print in *La prima parte delle lezioni . . .* (Florence, 1560); it was reprinted in *Lezzioni . . .* (Florence, 1590), a collection of Varchi's academic lessons.
6. Giuseppe Olmi, Dario A. Franchini, Renzo Margonari, Rodolfo Signorini, Attilio Zanca, and Chiara Tellini Perina, *La Scienza a Corte* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), p. 111. Julius Obsequens's *Prodigiorum liber* enjoyed numerous editions during the first half of the sixteenth century (e.g., Venice, 1508; Basel, 1521; Antwerp, 1532; Paris, 1545), including Lycosthenes' edition published in 1552.

7. Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present* 92 (1981): 30.
8. "Quanto alla diffinizione della cosa, Mostro, pigliandolo generalmente, e nella sua più larga significazione, si chiamano mostri tutte quelle cose, le quali avvengono fuori dell'ordine consueto e usitato corso della Natura, in qualunque modo avvengano e per qualunque ragione." Varchi, *Opere*, 2:662.
9. "un medico, dà una medicina a un malato per guarirlo ed ella l'ammazza o nollo guarisce, quello è mostro; e così se un pittore volendo ritrarre alcuno, non sa somigliarlo, o un fabbro volendo fare un pugnale, facesse un cotello, e di tutti gli altri nel medesimo modo." Varchi, *Opere*, 2:663.
10. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), pp. 181–82. Daston and Park discuss the French chronicler Johannes Multivallis, who interpreted the double-sex of the monster of Ravenna as a symbol of the sin of sodomy. This was just one of the many sins encoded in the body of the monster that was thought to be God's call to repentance.
11. Realdo Colombo, *De re anatomica* (Venice, 1559), cited in "Realdo Colombo: 'On Those Things Rarely Found in Anatomy'—An Annotated Translation from the *De Re Anatomica* (1559)," trans. Robert J. Moes and C. D. O'Malley, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 34 (1960): 527.
12. Here I use Daston and Park's thesis that the early modern monster can be understood in "three separate complexes of interpretations and associated emotions—horror, pleasure, and repugnance—which overlapped and coexisted during much of the early modern period, although each had its own rhythm and dynamic," *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, p. 176.
13. I refer to the "Prologo" with the masculine pronoun because, following the tradition, a male actor was almost certainly cast in this role. The audience most likely perceived the "Prologo" as male because of his consistent use of male endings for adjectives and participles when describing himself ("vestito," "sono venuto"). Furthermore, his self-effacing comparison to other male poets favors assigning him a male gender.
14. "Il nome di essa Comedia sie hermafrodito. Il compositor così le ha posto nome per due cagioni, l'una perché egli ha voluto esser sicur ch'ella piaccia in qualche parte al mondo, portando il nome di que' tali che, per essere habili a servire a l'uno et a l'altro sesso, sono cotanto cari tenuti, e da donne e da huomini così estremamente accarezzati; ma in effetto ella per dire il vero, è nasciuto tale, cred'io, per lo peccato di chi l'ha generata, ché sono stati un fratello e una sorella: l'uno chiamato il Viluppo e l'altra La Notte. Non vi pensiate però ch'ella intieramente sia mezzo maschio e mezzo femina, ché pigliareste errore; però ch'ella del maschio, che è il Viluppo, non ha però altra somiglia che a pena quella poca cosa che per maschio la può far conoscere, e così poca che le donne ch'hanno così perfetta vista a pena la potranno discernere; et per questo non è l'autore ancora troppo sicuro ch'a loro ella deggia piacere. De la femina poi, che è la Notte, ella n'ha assai più larga parte . . . qui taccio; verrà chi tosto vi farà ridere e ismasellare. Solo mi resta a dirvi che qual'hora questo povero hermafrodito verrà alle case vostre, non lo abbrusciate come persona che meriti il fuoco, che egli non ha né colpa né peccato nello incesto dei suoi genitori: benché a lui sia toccato con tanta sua vergogna manifestarlo. E volesselo il cielo che tutti gli incesti si vedessero e scoprissero al mondo per via di simili mostri." Girolamo Parabosco, *Comedie di M. Girolamo Parabosco, Cioè La Notte, Il Viluppo, I*

*Contenti, L'Hermafrodito, Il Pellegrino, Il Marinaio* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito, 1560), 4v–5v. The first edition was published in 1549 (Venice: Giolito) and was entitled *L'Hermafrodit*. The only modern edition is Girolamo Parabosco, *L'Hermafrodito, I Contenti*, ed. Marina Calore and Giuseppe Vecchi (Bologna: Arnaldi Forni, 1977). I have conservatively modernized the usage of punctuation, capitalization, and diacritical marks.

15. Girolamo Parabosco was born in Piacenza in 1524 and took up permanent residence in Venice around 1541. Although he received formal music training first from his father, Vincenzo Parabosco, and later from Adrian Willaert in Venice, his literary education most likely lacked such formal structure. In 1551 he became the organist for the Church of San Marco. He moved in both musical and literary circles. He knew Aretino and the dialect playwright Andrea Calmo. He was associated with the Accademia Musicale and composed music for the dramatic productions of the Accademia dei Pellegrini. His literary corpus includes eight comedies, the tragedy *La Progne* (1548), a collection of *novelle* entitled *I Diporti* (1550), a collection of letters (1551), and madrigals as well. He continued his musical and literary pursuits in Venice until his death in 1557. For biographical information on Parabosco, see Francesco Bussi, *Umanità e arte di Girolamo Parabosco, Madrigalista, Organista, e Poligrafo* (Piacenza: Edizione del Liceo Musicale "G. Nicolini," 1961); Padoan, *La commedia rinascimentale veneta*, p. 198; Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 163–68; and Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, trans. Alexander H. Krappe, Roger H. Sessions, and Oliver Strunk (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 444–48.
16. The first chapter of Ambroise Paré's *On Monsters and Marvels* lists the following as causes of monstrous births: "The first is the glory of God. The second his wrath. The third, too great a quantity of seed. The fourth, too little a quantity. The fifth, the imagination. The sixth, the narrowness or smallness of the womb. The seventh the indecent posture of the mother, as when, being pregnant, she has sat too long with her legs crossed, or pressed against her womb. The eighth, through a fall or blows struck against the womb of the mother being with child. The ninth, through hereditary or accidental illnesses. The tenth, through rotten or corrupt seed. The eleventh, through a mixture or mingling of seed. The twelfth, through the artifices of wicked spital beggars. The thirteenth, through Demons and Devils." In Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L. Pallister (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 3–4. The first edition of this work was published in French in 1573 and included many of the monsters found in the works of Boastuau and Lycosthenes.
17. Varchi, for example, lists the two major physiological causes of monstrous births as defects in the sperm and the "menstruo," which was thought to be the procreative matter in women. Other causes include the heavens, accidents of place, and the imagination. Varchi, *Opere*, 2:668.
18. "è nasciuta tale, cred'io, per lo peccato di chi l'ha generata, ché sono stati un fratello e una sorella."
19. "a lui sia toccato con tutta sua vergogna manifestarlo [l'incesto]. E volesselo il cielo, che tutti gli incesti si vedessero e scoprissero al mondo per via di simili mostri."
20. "Il est tout certain que les plus souvent ces creatures monstrueuses procedent du iugement, iustice, chastisement, e malediction de Dieu, lequel permet que les peres

- e meres produisent telles abominations, en l'horreur de leur pechè, par ce qu'ilz se preciphet indifferemment respect ou observations d'age, de lieu, de temps, ou autre Loix de nature." Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires Prodigieuses* (Paris, 1564), p. 18.
21. "questo mostruoso et infame parto, qualche volta nasce dal sinistro, e non usato congiungimento dell'huomo et della donna, come quando la femina sta di sopra, et l'huomo di sotto, il che è anche grandamente contrario alla sanità del corpo et massimamente quando l'huomo ha mangiato di soperchio." Levinius Lemnius, *De gli occulti miracoli* (Venice, 1553), p. 25.
  22. Ottavia Niccoli indicates that this reasoning allows Martin Weinrich, in his *De ortu monstorum* (1595), to say on the one hand "Num lecito occidere monstrum" (It is forbidden to kill the monster), while condoning the murder of infants determined to be the result of diabolical copulation. See Ottavia Niccoli "Menstruum quasi Monstruum': parti mostruosi e tabù menstruale nel '500," *Quaderni storici* 44 (1980):404. This article has been translated into English: "Menstruum quasi monstrum': Monstrous Births and Menstrual Taboo in the Sixteenth Century," trans. Mary M. Gallucci, in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 1-25. A frequently cited case of infanticide from the period involved a woman from Avignon who in 1543 gave birth to a child resembling a dog. She confessed (under torture?) to having copulated with a dog. Under the order of King François, she and her baby were burned to death in Marseilles on July 31, 1543. Varchi, *Opere*, 2:666. See also Tommaso Garzoni, *Il serraglio degli stupori del mondo* (Venice, 1613), p. 91.
  23. Ireneo Sanesi, *Storia dei generi letterari italiani: La Commedia*, 2 vols. (Milan: Vallardi, 1911), 1:257. Sanesi also notes many relationships between Parabosco's comedies and *I Diporti: Il Marinaio* contains a version of novella XIII; the plot of *Il Pelligrino* is based on novella XII; novella VII appears in *I Contenti*.
  24. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, p. 166. Andrews notes that this wooing scene becomes a sort of stock piece for Parabosco, which he inserts virtually unaltered into different comedies.
  25. "Tutte queste autoripetizioni dimostrano, come già disse, che l'immaginazione del nostro autore non era né ricca né varia" (All of these self-repetitions show, as I have said already, that our author's imagination was neither rich nor varied); Sanesi, *Storia dei generi*, p. 257. Padoan notes that after his first two comedies, Parabosco "già cozza contro serie difficoltà di fantasia, onde i medesimi motivi si ripetono dall'una all'altra commedia" (had already run into serious problems of imagination, for which the same motifs of one comedy recur in another); Padoan, "Girolamo Parabosco," p. 201.
  26. "Non vi pensiate però ch'ella intieramente sia mezzo maschio e mezzo femina, ché pigliareste errore; però ch'ella del maschio, che è il Viluppo, non ha però altra somiglia che a pena quella poca cosa che per maschio la può far conoscere, e così poca che le donne ch'hanno così perfetta vista a pena la potranno discernere; et per questo non è l'autore ancora troppo sicuro ch'a loro ella deggia piacere. De la femina poi, che è la Notte, ella n'ha assai più larga parte."
  27. Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, p. 27. Although Varchi had not developed such a precise taxonomy, he did address the problem of assigning a gender to these sexually ambiguous creatures in the following passage: "nasceranno Ermafroditi, che anticamente chiamavano Androgini, ciò è uomo e donna. Dove noteremo, che Aristotile dice, che negli Ermafroditi, nome composto di Mercurio e Venere dai



quali dicono gli astrologi che procedono, sempre è uno de' duoi membri vano e inutile: il che è contro Plinio, Alberto Magno, e molti altri, che vogliono che eglino possano servirsi dell'un membro e dell'altro, essendo ora agenti e quando pazienti: ma fa bene per leggi che vogliono che gli Ermafroditi si giudichino o maschi o femmine secondo il membro che prevale in loro" (they will be born hermaphrodites, which in antiquity were called androgynes, which means man and woman. Where we will note that Aristotle says that in hermaphrodites—whose compound name comes from Mercury and Venus [the planets] under which astrologers say they are born—one of the two members is always idle and useless. This goes against Pliny, Albertus Magnus, and many others who think that hermaphrodites can use both members, being now active and now passive. But, the laws do well that require that hermaphrodites judge themselves to be either male or female, according to the member that prevails). Varchi, *Opere*, 2:667.

28. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 7. Cohen entitles his third thesis "The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis." This concept of the monstrous will be discussed further below.
29. Julia Epstein suggests that the law recognizes the categories of male and female for three reasons: 1) as a means of social organization to prevent fraud, 2) to grant privileges/responsibilities according to sex, and 3) to regulate morality, to prevent same-sex acts or marriage. See Julia Epstein, "Either/Or-Neither/Both: Sexual Ambiguity and the Ideology of Gender," *Genders* 7 (1990): 99–142.
30. "perché egli ha voluto esser sicur ch'ella piaccia in qualche parte al mondo, portando il nome di que' tali che, per essere habili a servire a l'uno e l'altro sesso, sono cotanto cari tenuti, e da donne e da uomini così estremamente accarezzati."
31. In 1536 Alessandro Pazzi published the first Latin translation of the *Poetics* in a portable and affordable edition. Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 371–73.
32. The Terenzian prologue introduced the comedy and the author, cited the Greek source for the work, and then engaged the author's critics and debated questions of comic theory. The Plautine prologue, more expository than theoretical in nature, featured a plot summary. The preference of Italian dramatists for the Terenzian model, which allowed the expression of the author's views, began with the revivals of Latin comedies in the late fifteenth century. In 1488 Angelo Poliziano wrote a "Prologus in Plauti comoediam Menaechmos" in which he criticized both "commediografi incolti" and moralistic censors. Many authors, however, retained the Plautine device of the plot summary. See Nino Borsellino, "Prologo," *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, 9 vols. (Rome: Maschere, 1954–62), 8:526–34. Parabosco favored the Terenzian model for his prologues; only his *Il Viluppo* contains a plot summary in the prologue.
33. Bibbiena's prologue to *La Calandria* provides an excellent example of an author's expression of comic theory. The Prologue says that the comedy is "in prosa non in versi, moderna non antica, volgare, non latina" (in prose, not verse; modern, not classical; in Italian, not Latin). Many modern critics studying the codification of this genre rely on material gleaned from prologues to support and illustrate their arguments. Nino Borsellino believes that prologues "hanno un notevolissimo valore come documenti della poetica comica cinquecentesca e delle prevalenti tendenze e diramazioni del gusto drammatico" (have a notable value as documents of the

- sixteenth-century poetics of comedy and of the prevalent tendencies and branches of dramatic taste); Borsellino, "Prologo," p. 530. See also Franca Angelini, "Teatro moderno," in *Letteratura italiana: teatro, musica, tradizione dei classici* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), p. 77.
34. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, p. 206.
  35. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, p. 145. Bussi notes the same tensions between the *commedia rustica in dialetto* and the *togata commedia letteraria*; Bussi, *Umanità*, p. 76.
  36. Angelo Beolco (1495–1542) composed comedies and dramatic dialogues in a *pavano koiné*, which he performed in his native Padua as well as in Venice and Ferrara. Thematically he abandoned the plot lines of classical theater, choosing instead to explore poverty, war, and the difficulties encountered by peasants who had emigrated to the cities in search of work. Although his later works would include five-act plays, his use of dialect and his preference for farce distinguish him from the more canonical comic writers.
  37. Andrea Calmo (1510–71) also shunned the more respectable genre, writing and performing in what today are called plurilinguistic comedies. In Calmo's theater, plot yields to language, and emphasis is placed on the misunderstandings that arise from the babel on stage. See Padoan, *La commedia rinascimentale veneta*, pp. 154–83; and Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, pp. 145–68.
  38. Padoan, *La commedia rinascimentale veneta*, p. 201.
  39. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, p. 165.
  40. "Non date voi hora con il recitar vostro quel giocandissimo e mirabilissimo piacere a tutta Vinegia, ch'ella maggiormente desidera? E' mi par di vedervi sopra la scena farvi schiavi quanti vi veggono et odono. Io sento fin qui il rumore dello applauso che vi danno le genti; le quali, montando le mura del loco ove sete, rompendo porte e passando canali d'alto smontando, si pongono a periglio di mille morti per poter solamente goder una sol hora la dolcezza delle vostre parole." Cited in Padoan, *La commedia rinascimentale veneta*, pp. 160–61.
  41. "versi, strofette, rispetti, proverbi, motti." Bussi, *Umanità e arte*, pp. 76–77.
  42. *L'Hermafrodito*, 9r.
  43. Bianchini, "Girolamo Parabosco," pp. 346–47.
  44. *L'Hermafrodito*, 21v. Part of the humor of this rhyme derives from the sexual double entendre. In Italian "uccello" (bird) is slang for penis.
  45. *L'Hermafrodito*, 15v.
  46. *L'Hermafrodito*, 21v.
  47. Bianchini, "Girolamo Parabosco," p. 348. Sanesi indicates that this novella becomes tale XV in *I Diporti*. Sanesi, *Storia dei generi*, p. 257.
  48. Andrews considers this character to be a proto-Pantalone. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, p. 163.
  49. "mille burle, e infiniti accidenti fra mezo poi ci cadono." *Il Viluppo*, 5r.
  50. "che si sopporta: anzi si loda quando benché con dispiacere di qualche uno: s'imesta alcuna burla nella favola, purché il soggetto si rimanga puro e netto." *Il Viluppo*, 5v. The main plot of the comedy concerns a brother and sister who were separated at birth, and their quests to marry their beloveds. The secondary plot involves a clever servant who tricks an old man with the help of a necromancer.
  51. Bianchini observes "Nell'*Hermafrodito* il garbuglio dell'intreccio nuoce più che nelle altre due commedie" (the tangle of the plot harms more than in the other two comedies). Bianchini, "Girolamo Parabosco," p. 350.

52. David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of Monsters in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), p. 170. Here Williams summarizes Mircea Eliade's study of the androgyne entitled *The Two and the One*.
53. Tommaso Garzoni proposes that the Hebrews believed that the first man God created was a hermaphrodite ("che la maestà di Dio producesse il primo huomo mostruosamente cioè con l'uno, e l'altro sesso, al che fusse maschio e femmina"). Garzoni, *Il serraglio*, pp. 106–7. See also Williams's discussion on hermaphrodites, *Scripts and Scenarios*, pp. 168–76.
54. Georges Canguilhem, "Monstrosity and the Monstrous," *Diogenes* 40 (1962): 27.
55. Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 160.
56. Cohen, "Monster Culture," p. 7.
57. I've borrowed this concept from Cohen, who writes: "The monstrous body is a genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system; the monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure." Cohen, *Monster Culture*, p. 7.
58. Although a biographical analysis is not within the scope of this article, I would suggest that the hermaphrodite, in refuting boundary and enclosure, could be seen as a symbol for Parabosco's own frustration with feeling compelled to define himself either as a poet or a musician. Pietro Aretino joked in a letter about Parabosco's refusal to be pigeonholed, stating, "nel dirvisi che bella cosa è la tragedia vostra di Progne rispondete: Io son musico, e non poeta. Lodandovi poi i canti . . . dite: Io sono poeta e non musico" (in telling you what a beautiful thing your tragedy *La Progne* is, you respond: I am a musician not a poet. In praising your songs . . . you say: I am a poet, and not a musician). Cited in Bussi, *Umanità e arte*, p. 23. Parabosco feared that being forced into one category would diminish his credibility in the other. In the prologue to *Il Viluppo*, Lucretio expresses the author's fear that because he is a musician he will not be taken seriously as a poet by critics who will say that he is a good poet for a musician (*Il Viluppo*, 4r). After Lucretio has explained the critics' attempts to dismiss Parabosco's literary endeavors as those of a dilettante, Ortensio comments "io ti intendo, per essere il Parabosco Musico, diranno che per un Musico egli è buon Poeta" (I understand you, because Parabosco is a musician, they [the critics] will say that he is a good poet for a musician). *Il Viluppo*, 4r.

## CHAPTER 11

### *Ogres and Fools: On the Cultural Margins of the Seicento*

NANCY L. CANEPA



The seventeenth century witnessed the expansion of aesthetic canons to include the grotesque, the ugly, the common, and, in general, any manifestation of “nature wandering, jesting, stretching the limits of her domain”; the lyric poetry of the Marinisti provides countless examples of this tendency, just as the “poetics of the marvelous” theorizes it. In this period there was also an intensification of interest in “dwarfs, freaks and other human anomalies” in the realms of art and natural history, and “births of monstrous humans and animals infested chronicles and scientific and popular literature.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the category of the monstrous was undergoing serious revision. Because of various factors, including the growth of skepticism and experiences in the New World, human “monstrosities” were demoted, on the scale of absolute alterity, to either cultural marvels (as in the case of non-Europeans, whose difference, but essential human normalcy, was affirmed) or natural deviations (as in the case of physical malformation). At the same time, socially marginal subjects such as paupers, peasants, and supposed witches were rendered metaphorically monstrous.

In this essay I first consider one seventeenth-century incarnation of an imaginary monstrous being—the “orco,” or ogre—in order to show how such a radically “other” figure may come to inhabit a realm of relative, ambivalent monstrosity in which he—or she—becomes part of a general critique of social and literary institutions. I then investigate another figure of alterity commonly found in fairy tales—the fool—and argue that the sort of carnivalesque message that the ogres embody finds its way back to society via this character. Both ogres and fools appear in Giambattista Basile’s *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–36), a

collection of forty-nine fairy tales contained by a fiftieth frame tale (also a fairy tale) that are told in Neapolitan dialect to a motley court over a five-day period by ten grotesque but quick-tongued hags. Each of the five days contains ten tales, and days one through four are concluded by eclogues—satiric (and very un-fairy-tale-like) dialogues that focus on various social ills of Basile's time. *Lo cunto* is the first framed collection of literary fairy tales to appear in Europe; as such, it had a tremendous influence on the further development of the genre.

Ogres have their most distant origins in the classical underworld deity Orcus. Assimilated into Christian legend and popular tradition, they are imagined as savage monsters that devour humans—in particular, children. Literary ogres appear in the Italian epic tradition in the work of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Pulci; in all of these authors, the ogres are generally terrifying figures of difference, obstacles to be overcome, and often destroyed, in the course of the epic quest.<sup>2</sup> These epic ogres seem to embody everything that civilization is not, or does not wish to be, or fears that it could become, and as such are typical “oppositional” figures.

It is characteristic of folk- and fairy tales, too, to present absolute aesthetic and ethical categories: the characters that populate their worlds are either beautiful or ugly, good or bad, helpers or antagonists. The subtle gradations of similarity and difference that exist in the “real” world are most frequently reduced to a play of opposites that leaves no doubt about who is destined to win and who to lose, who deserves sympathy and who fear or disdain. One of the reasons these boundaries are kept so clear-cut has to do with the usual lack of psychological definition in fairy tales, which narrate events—phases of their protagonists' journeys toward a resolution of their dilemmas—rather than human development or the evolution of relationships between characters (even if, of course, fairy tales lend themselves to interpretations as symbolic representations of both these sorts of developments).<sup>3</sup>

But in *Lo cunto* neither the paradigms of the moribund epic nor the severe classifications of the generic fairy tale are respected. For example, let us consider the case of kings: there are monarchs in *Lo cunto* who fulfill the royal ideal of virtue and strength, but there are many more who, although they may ultimately triumph, deviate from this ideal. Kings are the ultimate bearers of authority in the fairy tale, and as such they symbolically figure the hierarchies of power prevailing in the “civilized” world. Accordingly, Basile's representation of deficient kings can be construed as a critique of the power structures of his own time. There is, however, another group of characters that illuminates just as forcefully the tenuous borders between good and bad, between civilized and savage, between “us” and “them.” These are ogres, those most classic of fairy-tale antagonists, who, just as in epics and legends, conventionally are “others” to civilized man in just about every sense imaginable. Socially, they do not abide by civilized norms of organization and existence; indeed, they are often cannibals. Geographically, they live in forests, atop mountains, or in other wild dimensions far from the kingdoms and towns that are the heroes' points of

departure. Physically, they are depicted as monstrous beings, giants or dwarfs, having something of the human but even more of the beast, and they are often endowed with magical powers. Ogres, like fairy-tale figures of absolute good such as fairies, exist in a domain that although it borders on the human, is fundamentally different from it. As Rosemary Jackson has observed, "within a supernatural economy, or a magical thought mode, otherness is designated as otherworldly, supernatural, as being above, or outside, the human."<sup>4</sup>

The definition of evil fairy-tale ogres, as that of any imaginary or real "other," is directly correlated to, indeed established by, whomever or whatever they are "other" *to*: the hegemonic culture and socioeconomic system that goes by the name of "civilization."<sup>5</sup> In the case of the fairy tale, the civilization that ogres are pitted against is ostensibly a feudal world inhabited by kings and their subjects. The medieval historical referents of this sort of order (which had been to some degree revived in the "refeudalized" kingdom of Naples), had, of course, at the time Basile wrote, already been in crisis for many centuries. But the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were themselves also a time of vast upheavals in virtually all fields—scientific, religious, artistic, geographical, epistemological; this resulted in a questioning, and in many cases undoing, of other "civilized" categories that had previously seemed unquestionable. We will see that the reverberations of these cultural shifts penetrate even the most remote recesses of the world of *Lo cunto*, where the ogres that inhabit forests and other "wilds" consistently prove to be bearers of a relative, ambivalent monstrosity, suggesting not only that the categories of "good" and "evil" and "civilized" and "savage" can no longer be so rigidly articulated, but also, in many cases, that the ogres are figures of a positive difference.

Critics have commented on this sort of collapse of absolute categories, within the realm of narrative, at times of cultural change. For example, Jackson notes: "Romance narratives . . . represented all action unfolding under the influence of good or evil powers, with persons in the drama functioning as mere agents of this metaphysical battle. A loss of faith in supernaturalism, a gradual skepticism and problematization of the relationship of self to the world, introduced a much closer 'otherness,' something intimately related to the self."<sup>6</sup> By the very virtue of their status as outsiders to human civilization, Basile's ogres paradoxically embody an integrity that is lacking in the civilized world—the world of kings and courtiers—but also that, if allowed entrance to its ranks, could insinuate a crack in its well-polished facade. Figures of evil—in this case, ogres—are thus ideological constructs: "the concept of evil, which is usually attached to the other, is relative, transforming with shifts in cultural fears and values. Any social structure tends to exclude as 'evil' anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction, and this conceptualization, this naming of difference as evil, is a significant ideological gesture."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, by creating dubious "monsters" who often inspire admiration and sympathy instead of fear and loathing, Basile also effects, meta-textually, a revaluation of

the popular culture with which they are intimately linked as well as a general critique of court society and the canonical tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Structurally, Basile's ogres are conventional antagonists in that his fairy tales respect the basic narrative "movements" outlined by Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. They commonly make their appearance in a phase of the protagonist's progression toward a happy ending and are subsequently eliminated, either physically or narratively.<sup>9</sup> One thing that strikes the reader of *Lo cunto*, however, is how different Basile's ogres are from both their epic cousins and classic fairy-tale ogres. They consistently appear as humane (if not entirely human), sensible, and sensitive beings that are conscious of their alterity and of what they are "other" to: the courtly world of kings, princesses, and other nobility to which the heroes and heroines aspire. Basile's ogres, in fact, recall the "pre-Christian model of the better-intentioned chthonian divinities . . . whose ugliness belongs to the paradoxical pedagogy of the world upside down in which all values are inverted."<sup>10</sup> And although the frequently comic representation of ogres might seem to point to a debasement of a once terrifying antagonist to a clownish foil, it is precisely this attenuated difference—their carnivalesque in-betweenness—that accounts for their central role in the symbolic world of *Lo cunto*.<sup>11</sup>

This "use" of the ogre in a positive, or at least ambivalent, way recalls another related figure that enjoyed great popularity in the medieval and Renaissance periods—the wild man. These hairy, uncivilized creatures were sometimes considered descendants of the infernal Orcus, but also, alternatively, as distant relatives of the positive woodland fertility deity Silvanus. Indeed, from classical antiquity on, the figure of the semi-human wild man or savage embodied cultural anxieties about what civilized man could degenerate into and, conversely, was the vehicle for equally strong anxieties about a more "genuine" essence that civilized man would like to retrieve from the depths of his hyper-aculturated being.<sup>12</sup> Richard Bernheimer, in his classic work on the subject, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, emphasizes this dual valence of the wild man:

It is true that to venture into the woods and there to prove one's mettle by slaying the dragon, the giant or the Saracen meant to combat the ever present threat of natural and moral anarchy. . . . But wildness is . . . not only a task but a temptation. . . . [B]efore the Middle Ages were out, it became fashionable to identify oneself with savage things, to slip into the wild man's garb, and thus to repudiate that very principle of hieratic order upon which medieval society was founded.

Thus, as Bernheimer notes, the wild man, whose "manner of life, in its stark simplicity, is regarded as a paragon of virtue lost in the unfolding of civilization," could become a vehicle of moral valuation.<sup>13</sup> With specific regard to a period closer to Basile, Hayden White comments in a similar vein:

It is not strange . . . that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the social bonds of medieval culture began to disintegrate, the Wild Man became gradually transformed from an object of loathing and fear . . . into an object of open envy and admiration. It is not surprising that, in an age of general cultural revolution, the popular anti-type of the officially defined "normal" humanity, the Wild Man, should be transformed into the ideal or model of a free humanity, his presumed attributes made the essence of a lost humanity.

White cites as examples of such noble savages the wild men of Spenser and Hans Sachs, who became the "anti-type[s] of the corrupt world of the court and the city"; he further notes that as the concept of wildness became increasingly fictionalized, it also became "an instrument of intracultural criticism."<sup>14</sup> And in the following centuries, the wealth of imagery surrounding the medieval wild man also informed representations and interpretations of New World "savages," the source of great curiosity on the part of Europeans and the inspiration for what critics have seen as a cult of "cultural, technological and communistic primitivism" that had in the New World a concrete referent for the popular and erudite dreams of Cuccagna and the Golden Age.<sup>15</sup> As the wild man began to be relegated to the past and treated as an extinct creature, the Indian supplanted him as the "screen onto which Renaissance Europeans, bound by their institutions, project their darkest and yet most compelling fantasies."<sup>16</sup>

Turning to the fairy-tale ogres of *Lo cunto*, we find no clear-cut substitution of a terrifying Orcus figure with a "noble savage" who is the fruit of Golden Age musings. Basile's ogres function not as instruments of nostalgic evocation of a simpler, more "primitive" state of Nature, but as part of a general critique that has as its ultimate aim the criticism of social ills of the moment and, above all, the interrogation of rigid cultural categories.

In *Lo cunto* there are some ogres of the more traditional sort, but it is significant that most of them are merely mentioned in passing, as if they were ghostly apparitions from distant traditions. Even when ogres and ogresses have the role of evil antagonists, they often trigger descriptions that seem to serve less to define the ogre's role in the tale than to exemplify Basile's position as innovator of the tradition of anti-Petrarchan *effictio* (which includes Berni, Folengo, and so on) and thus to highlight the entire text's grotesque deviation from literary and linguistic norms. This "textual monstrosity" is evident at various levels in *Lo cunto*: in the abundance of extended metaphors and extravagant conceits, typical enough in this period but here part of a project aimed at elaborating a new comic, and often carnivalesque, literary model; in the choice of dialect as a literary language; and in the use of long-winded and hyperbolic descriptions in a genre that usually liquidates characterization with abstract laconic phrases such as "the most beautiful princess in the whole world," "the most hideous ogre in all of ogredom," and so on. Many of the most extravagantly detailed



descriptions of monstrous characters, whether of the ogre or human family, are, in fact, of females, such as this portrait of an ogress in II, 7, “La palomma” (The Dove):

Aveva li capille come a na scopa de vrusco, non già ped annettare le case de folinie e ragnatele, ma pe annegrecare ed affommarle li core; la fronte era de preta de Genova, pe dare lo taglio a lo cortiello de la paura che svennegnava li piette; l’uocchie erano comete, che predecevano tremmolice de gamme, vermenare de core, iaio de spirete, filatorie d’arme e cacarelle de cuorpo, pocca portava lo terrore ne la facce, lo spaviento ne l’occhiatura, lo schianto ne li passe, la cacavessa ne le parole. Era la vocca sannuta comm’a puorco, granne comm’a scorfano, steva comm’a chi pate de descenzo, vavosa comm’a mula; ’nsomma da la capo a lo pede vedive no destellato de bruttezza, no spitale de struppie.<sup>17</sup>

(Her hair was like a broom made of dry branches, not to sweep dust and cobwebs out of houses, but to blacken and smoke hearts; her forehead was made of genoese stone, to whet the knife of fear that rips open chests; her eyes were comets which predicted shaky legs, wormy hearts, shivering spirits, colicky souls, and loose intestines, because she wore terror on her face, fear in her stare, din in her footsteps, diarrhea in her words. Her mouth was tusked like a pig’s, big like a scorpion fish’s, wide-open like the mouth of those who suffer from convulsions, drooly like a mule’s; in short, from her head to her toes you saw a distillate of ugliness, a hospital of deformation.)

In the tale where this description appears, the ogress is the mother of a fairy who will marry the tale’s hero, a prince, and this sort of continuum—in fact, blood tie—between antagonist and magic helper, which we find repeated again and again in tales where ogres are interrelated to fairies, itself puts into question the absolute negativity of the ogres.

Even ogres who are “pure” antagonists and meet deaths that, according to fairy-tale logic, are just punishments for their violent treatment of the tales’ heroes, are often depicted as suffering beings. In V,4, “Lo turzo d’oro” (The Golden Trunk), a variation on the Cupid and Psyche story, the heroine Parmetella must undertake a series of tasks in order to reverse the harm done when she held a light to her mysterious lover Tuoni-e-lampo’s beauty. Tuoni, who is actually the son of an ogress, instructs her to throw his aunt’s baby ogress into the oven:

truove l’orca, co na peccerella ’m braccio c’have allommato no forno pe te ’nce arrostore, la quale te dirrà: ‘Tiene sta criatura, e aspetta quanto vao suso a pigliare li suone’; ma sacce ca se va a ammolare le zanne pe te squartare a piezze a piezze. E tu iettanno la fegliola dinto a lo forno senza pietà, ca è carne di orco. (p. 936)

(you'll find the ogress, who will have lit the oven to roast you, with a baby in her arms. She'll tell you: "Take this baby and wait a minute while I go upstairs and get the instruments"; but be aware that she's going to sharpen her tusks so that she can cut you up into pieces. And you throw the baby into the oven without mercy, because she's ogre meat.)

It is clear that Parmetella must effect this grotesque reversal of the classic role of the ogre as devourer of children in order to survive, but the epilogue to this incident is startling. At the end of the tale we learn that the bereaved mother of the little ogress threw herself into the oven, too, and that her sister (Tuoni's mother), out of desperation over these deaths, battered her head against the wall until her brains spilled out. In the introduction to the next tale, it is mentioned that "Dove lo caso dell'orche poteva portare quarche frecola de compassione addusse causa de gusto, rallegrannose ognuno che le cose de Parmetella fossero rescute assai meglio de chello che se penzava" (p. 944) (Whereas the story of the ogresses might have provoked some crumb of compassion, instead it provoked only pleasure, because everyone was happy that Parmetella's business had gone far better than one would have thought). This is a hint that there are other, marginalized stories, just as dramatic as the "master stories," which the courtly audience of the tale does not want to hear.

Or let us consider the case of the ogre in I,5, "La polece" (The Flea), who retains something of his historic monstrosity—cannibalism, most notably—but is nonetheless portrayed as having a coherence and dignity of his own that stand in explicit contrast to the lack of the same in the "civilized" world. In this tale a king offers his daughter in marriage to whomever can guess the animal to which a large skin he displays belongs (it is an engorged flea). An ogre guesses right and carries off the princess.

From the start of "La polece" there are several ironic reversals. The first is in the contrast between the king's very unfatherly, indeed "monstrous" behavior, when, with cool resignation and an exaggerated sense of honor, he agrees to keep his promise even if the future husband is an ogre. Moreover, the ogre is portrayed as just another suitor; this mundane, very unmonstrous role undermines the description of him as one "che 'n vederelo schitto faceva venire lo tremmolese, lo filatorio, la vermenara e lo iaio a lo chiù arresecato giovane de sto munno" (p. 110) (the mere sight of whom brought tremors, diarrhea, worms, and chills to the boldest young man in this world). When Porziella, the daughter, learns of her father's decision, she cries out:

o patre, o patre crodele, non sì nato cierto de carne omana! l'orche marine te dezero lo sango, le gatte sarvateche te dezero lo latte! ma che dico anemale de maro e de terra? ogne anemale ama la razza soia, . . . tu schitto haie contra stommaco la figlia! (pp. 110–12)

(O father, cruel father, you couldn't possibly have been born from human flesh! Orcas [sea monsters] supplied you with blood, wild

cats nursed you! But why am I talking about sea and land animals?  
Every animal loves its offspring, . . . only you can't stomach your  
own daughter!)

Porziella first makes reference to the "monstrous" natural world to which the "civilized" world of the king is opposed (and supposedly superior), but then she recognizes that the order of the natural world is actually far more just than the one governing her father's world. And the king, in his next words, fully plays the monster: "si te mecco ste granfe adduosso non te lasso zervola sana e te faccio pigliar sto terreno a diente!" (p. 112) (if I get my paws on you I won't leave a hair on your head, and I'll sow this earth with your teeth!).

Porziella takes the ogre's hand and goes off with him to the forest where his house is, "tutta tapezzata e aparata 'ntuorno d'ossa d'uommene che s'aveva cannariato" (p. 114) (all lined and decorated with the bones of men he had devoured). They then begin their life together. The ogre brings home "quarte d'accise" (quarters of slaughtered men) from his hunting trips, and when Porziella is disgusted by the sight of human flesh, the ogre first exclaims "Chesso è dare confiette a puorce!" (That's what happens when you give sweets to pigs!)—Porziella does not know a good meal when she sees it—and then tells her he will go hunting for some wild pigs the next morning, illustrating neatly with his plan to bring back pig for the metaphorical pig Porziella that his cannibalism is not a perversion but merely his "forma mentis." Although of hideous appearance and a seemingly dreadful lifestyle, the ogre is actually a considerate and attentive new husband.<sup>18</sup> Porziella's main complaint about her new status is, in fact, not that she must now fear for her life, but that it is socially beneath her: "E pure so' figlia de re e puro so' cresciuta a pappalardielle e puro me so' vista drinto lo grasso!" (p. 114) (And yet, I'm a king's daughter, and yet, I was brought up on pappardelle, and yet, I was always surrounded by fat!). When seven giants endowed with superhuman strength (which, again, contrasts ironically with the ogre's very human sensitivity) and who are "tutte cortise, tutte ammoreuse" (p. 116) (all courteous, all kind) appear on the scene and help Porziella escape, it is clear that the ogre's days are numbered. As, with the help of a grape harvester's ladder, he is trying to climb a tower the giants have erected to keep him from catching up with them, he is knocked down by the sharpshooter of the group "comm'a piro 'n terra" (like a pear to the earth), who then "le tagliaie lo cuollo, comme se fosse de caso ricotta" (p. 120) (cuts his throat as if it were ricotta). If we look at the reaction of the listeners at the start of the next tale, we read that they "facettero na dechiaratoria d'asetate a lo re catammaro, che mese a tanto riseco l'interesse de lo sango e la soccessione de lo stato pe na cosa de vrenna" (p. 124) (gave a certificate of asininity to the foolish king, who had exposed his own flesh and blood and the succession of his state to such great risks, and all for a trifling matter). From this perspective the ogre's death is simply a sacrifice to the "ragion di stato" that governs a court inhabited, as are most of *Lo cunto*'s imaginary courts, by distracted and irresponsible kings.

At the other extreme, tales like "Viola" (II,3) feature a thoroughly domesticated ogre, a comic caricature of his historical self. Viola is tricked by her sisters, who are envious of the attentions a neighboring prince bestows on her, into entering an ogre's garden that borders her own house (the adjacency of the ogre's dwelling to an urban palazzo also underlines, spatially, the breakdown of clear-cut differences between ogres and kings). There she encounters not a terrifying monster, as her sisters had hoped, but a gullible and good-hearted creature, who notices her when "*se lassaie scappare no vernacchio cossì spotestato e co tanto remmore e strepeto che Viola, pe la paura, strillava: 'Oh, mamma mia, aiutame!'*" (p. 314) (he let out a fart that was so colossal, and with such noise and uproar, that Viola, out of fear, started shrieking: "Oh, mamma mia, help me!"). As he remembers the example (cited in Pliny) of Spanish mares impregnated by the wind, the ogre becomes convinced that his fart must have fecundated one of the trees in the garden. He thus accepts Viola as his daughter and hands her over to the care of three fairies. (The ogre's appeal to classical authority—Pliny and others, in this case—is typical of Basile's comic degradation of the materials of elite traditions.) The lovesick prince finds Viola and asks the ogre to let him into the garden, and "*l'uerco, comme vassallo de lo patre, non potenno negare sto piacere de poco cosa, l'offerze, si non vastava una, tutte le cammare soie e la vita stessa*" (p. 316) (the ogre, who was a vassal of his father's, couldn't refuse him this small favor and offered him, as if one were not enough, all of his rooms and his very life). The garden then is stage for a series of amorous trysts between Viola and the prince, which eventually culminate in their marriage.

We may read such an example of a citified, tame ogre as an allegory of the entrance of the ugly and the monstrous into the aesthetic and moral canons of this period, but in this figure, whose main function is to act as go-between for Viola and the prince, we also see a blurring of absolute ethical difference. On the one hand, even what is usually the most determinedly "other" of social subjects is transformed into a loyal and fearful subject. But the ogre also provides paternal protection and a haven to a heroine, intelligent and in her own way virtuous, who finds it hard to survive in the "civilized" world that lies outside the ogre's garden.

"Corvetto" (III,7) offers an even more striking example of ogres that are anything but savage but who must nevertheless be killed off out of political necessity. In this tale, a virtuous—and enchanted—courtier is much envied by his fellow courtiers, who practice their arts in "*sto 'nfierno de la corte, dove le losegne se vennenno a quatterto, le malegnitate e li male afficie se mesurano a tommola, li 'nganne e li trademiente se pesano a cantara!*" (p. 572) (this hell which goes by the name of court, where pleasures are sold by the basket, treacheries and wrongs suffered by the quintal, tricks and betrayals by the bushel!). They convince their king to give Corvetto a series of tasks they are sure will finish their rival off: first he must capture an ogre's magic horse, then steal his precious linens, and finally take his palace itself. Naturally, Corvetto succeeds, winning the respect of the king as well as the hand of his daughter.

But what of the ogres whom he coolly kills off as part of his initiation into the court? At the start of the tale we learn that near the king's palace there lives "n'uerco, lo chiù bestiale e sarvateco che fosse stato maie all'Orcaria; che ped essere persequetato da lo re s'era fatto forte drinto no vosco desierto" (pp. 572–74) (an ogre, the most ferocious and wild of all of Ogresdom who, since he was persecuted by the king, had built a fortress for himself in a solitary forest). When, after stealing the ogre's horse, Corvetto is sent back for the linens, his attempt to subtract the coverlet under which the ogre couple is sleeping prompts the following domestic exchange:

Ma, scietatose, l'uerco disse a lo mogliere che non tirasse tanto, ca lo scommogliava tutto e l'averria fatto venire quarche doglia de matrone. "Anze tu scuommuoglie a me," respose l'orca, "che non m'è restato niente 'n cuollo!" "Dove diantane è la coperta?" leprecaie l'uerco e, calanno la mano 'n terra, toccaie la facce de Corvetto, pe la quale cosa commenzaie a gridare: "Lo monaciello, lo monaciello! gente, cannele, corrite!" (p. 576)

(But the ogre woke up and told his wife not to pull so much because he was left with no covers and would get a stomachache. "Actually, you're the one who's doing the uncovering," said the ogress, "since I don't have a thing on me!" "Where the hell is the bedspread?" demanded the ogre, and, putting his hand on the floor, he touched Corvetto's face and began to shout: "A goblin, a goblin! Help, bring candles, hurry!")

When Corvetto gets back to the palace, the king is delighted to see that the linens, "otre ch'erano de seta ragamate d'oro, 'nc'erano de chiù storiato chiù de millanta 'mprese de varie crapiccie e pensiere" (pp. 576–78) (besides being of silk and embroidered with gold, were decorated with stories and thousands of devices representing various whims and thoughts). The cultural inscriptions—devices and conceits—that literally cover the ogres suggest that they partake in the same cult of the marvelous that engages the king's world. In fact, what attracts the king to the ogre's possessions is that they are more marvelous than anything he has. But the envious courtiers are not yet satisfied, and Corvetto's final task is to bring back the ogre's palace, a masterpiece of baroque architecture:

da starece no 'mparatore; . . . e no porristevo credere li cortiglie, li seppuorteche, le loggette, li gaife, le latrine a caracò e le cemenere a tufolo che 'nce songo, co tanta architettura che l'arte se ne picca, la natura se ne corre e lo stupore ne sguazza. (p. 578)

(appropriate for an emperor, . . . and you wouldn't believe how many courtyards, porticoes, loggias, terraces, spiral latrines and tubed chimneys there are, with so much architectural detail that art is proud of it, Nature is made uneasy by it, and astonishment wallows in it.)

When Corvetto arrives at the palace, he finds that the ogress has just given birth to an ogrlet and that her husband is out inviting relatives to a party to celebrate the event. Under the pretense of helping the ogress with the heavy manual labor she is already doing the day after giving birth, Corvetto takes an ax and cuts off her head so that it falls to the ground “comm’a piro” (p. 578) (like a pear). He then digs a ditch and covers it with branches, and when all of the returning ogres fall into the ditch, he stones them to death. (Ogres’ heads are repeatedly likened to food—ricotta, pears—again hinting that the real cannibals are others. Basile has, of course, an illustrious precedent in contrasting “innocent cannibalism” with the barbarity of civilization, where man, perhaps not as literally but much more cruelly, devours man, in Montaigne’s essay “On Cannibals.”)

The *virtù* of this fairy-tale courtier has a dark underside and exacts a decidedly high price. Corvetto’s blind loyalty in carrying out the king’s orders ultimately leads him to massacre an entire family of peace-loving ogres, whose life of intense family relations and humane simplicity is an antithesis to the compromised social life at the king’s court, which is based on duplicity and ambition. These ogres, first “exiled” by the king and then killed off by his courtier, do in fact—with an ironic twist that we have already seen many times in *Lo cunto*—embody characteristics that “civilized man” has repressed, but the best, not the worst, of these. Bernheimer, when discussing the “positive” wild man, notes that he is a “model for human conduct, because of the intimacy and cordiality of his family life and the unanimity and . . . solidarity with which wild-man groups tackle the various tasks”—a description that applies quite well to the ogres of this tale.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the contrast between the ogres’ *modus vivendi* and that of the royal court may be read in the context of the anti-court rhetoric of this period, in which the superiority of a life centered around self-sufficient isolation is often contrasted to the frenetic life at court.<sup>20</sup>

In II,2, “Verdeprato” (Green Meadow), ogres participate directly in this polemic. In this tale, as the heroine Nella is on her way to have one last look at her dying lover, a prince, she happens to pass by the house of an ogre couple in a forest. She climbs up a tree and, as the windows of the house are open, hears every word of the somewhat drunken ogres’ affectionate after-dinner conversation. The ogress asks her husband: “Bello peluso mio, che se ’ntenne? che se dice pe sso munno?” (My hairy love, what’s the latest? What’s new in this world?). The ogre responds with a litany of complaints on the topsy-turvy state of things:

Fà cunto, ca non c’è no parmo de nietto e tutte le cose vanno a capoculo e a le storze. . . . ’Nce sarria assai che dicere de le ’mbroglie che correno, pocca se senteno cose da scire da li panne: boffune regalate, forfante stimate, poltrune ’norate, assassine spalliate, zannettarie defenzate e uommene da bene poco prezzate e stimate. (p. 300)

(All said, there's not an inch that's clean, and everything is upside down or sideways. . . . There would be too much to say about the deception that goes on, because you hear things that would make you jump out of your clothes: buffoons rewarded, good-for-nothings esteemed, lazybones honored, assassins protected, counterfeiterers defended, and respectable men not appreciated or esteemed at all.)

In a comic reversal of the usually "carnavalesque" nature of the ogre's wilds, where the protagonist is captured in a temporary inversion of the hierarchies that govern his "civilized" existence, in the passage above the real "mondo all rovescia" (world upside down) is civilized society itself, and the ogres are merely enlightened commentators on the doings of this society. These ogres appear as more ethically integral beings; they have been forced to live at the margins of civilization not because of any destructive or anarchic tendencies of their own that could rend the social fabric, but because there is no room in society for such beings.

As an example of the senseless incidents that occur in the outside world, the ogre in "Verdeprato" mentions to his wife the case of the prince who can only be healed if ogre-fat is applied to his wounds. Overhearing this remark, Nella climbs down from the tree, knocks at the door, and begs for something to eat. The ogress is eager to give her a morsel and get rid of her; her husband, on the other hand, is moved by cannibalistic intentions and asks her in. But when he falls asleep Nella beats him at his own game: like many of the "heroes" we have already considered, she practices her own form of cannibalism on him (a "butcher-job"), collects the fat, and goes off to save the prince.

The best example of a sage ogre thoroughly versed in the ways of the world is found in I,1, "Lo cunto dell'uerco" (The Tale of the Ogre), which as the first tale of *Lo cunto* assumes the status of the first step in Basile's own initiation into the fairy tale. It also presents a "master ogre" who embodies many of the characteristics that all of Basile's ogres will have and whose role in this tale suggests how Basile employs this figure of difference as an emblem for his own literary project. The very description of the ogre as "na racecotena, no parasacco, no brutto pezzente e na malombra spiccecata c'averria fatto sorreire n'Orlanno" (p. 34) (a malignant spirit, an old devil, a nasty pauper, and the very image of a ghost, who would have made an Orlando tremble) sums up the historical and cultural incarnations through which the ogre has passed—from infernal spirit to Christianized demon to figure of social marginality to a ghost of his former selves who needs, at this point, to receive semantic refurbishing—which is just what Basile provides.

Antuono, the numskull hero of the tale, is kicked out of his house by his mother and enters into a sort of apprenticeship with a likable ogre, "brutto de facce e bello de core" (p. 40) (ugly on the outside but with a good heart), as well

as sensitive and rhetorically astute, who lives at the foot of a mountain in the wilds. This ogre is described, physically, in a manner that should be familiar by now:

Era chisso naimuozzo e streppone de fescena, aveva la capo chiù grossa che na cocozza d'Innia, la fronte vrognoiosa, le ciglia ionte, l'uecchie strevellate, lo naso ammaccato, co doi forge che parevano doi chiaveche maestre, na vocca quanto no parmiento, da la quale scevano doi sanne che l'arrivavano all'ossa pezzelle, lo pietto peluso, le braccia de trapanaturo, le gamme a vota de lammia e li piede chiatte comm'a na papara. (p. 34)

(He was a midget, the size of a broom handle; his head was bigger than an Indian squash, his forehead all lumpy, his eyebrows connected, his eyes crossed, his nose flattened by two horse's nostrils that looked like sewers, his mouth as big as a millstone and from which emerged two tusks that hung down to the little bones of his feet; his chest was hairy, his arms like spinning reels, his legs like a cellar vault, and his feet as flat as a duck's.)

When he first meets up with the ogre, Antuono gives a fine demonstration of his simple-mindedness and lack of rhetorical skills, as evidenced by his incapacity to ask the right questions. He greets him: "A dio messere, che se fa? comme staie? vuoie niente? quanto 'nc'è da ccà a lo luoco dove aggio da ire?" (p. 34) (Good day, sir, what's up? How are you? You want anything? How far is it from here to the place where I have to go?). When the ogre replies "Vuoi stare a patrone?" (Do you want to work for me?), Antuono responds "Quanto vuoie lo mese?" (How much do you want a month?). The ogre tells him, "Attiene a servire 'noratamente, ca sarrimmo de convegna, e farraie lo buono iuorno" (Just make sure you tend to my needs decently: we'll get along fine and you'll see good times). Like many other heroes who strike up relationships with ogres that are indicated as specifically familial in nature, Antuono binds a "parentato" (kinship) with the ogre and moves in.<sup>21</sup> (This substitution of real fathers by woody ogres also suggests an insufficiency on the part of figures of authority—fathers—and a need to look for guidance outside conventional civilization—and literary tradition.)

For a time, Antuono lives idyllically in the wilds with the ogre, but when he gets homesick the ogre sends him back to town with a donkey that defecates jewels on command. On his way home, Antuono stops at an inn and divulges the secret of the animal's ability to the innkeeper, who steals it from him and replaces it with a common donkey. When Antuono arrives home and gives the command to the donkey, it dirties the better part of his sisters' dowry of linens that his mother had pulled out for the occasion, at which his mother kicks him out again. The ogre then supplies Antuono with a tablecloth that fills itself up with food, but once more Antuono inadvertently betrays the secret to the



innkeeper. The third time, the ogre gives him a club that attacks on command, and Antuono uses it on the innkeeper to regain the other two magic objects. He then returns home, marries off his six sisters, and lives happily ever after with his mother.

If Antuono does not mature into a socially integrable subject in the course of the tale, he does, under the ogre's mentorship, acquire a certain rhetorical maturity: an awareness of the workings of language and an increased linguistic control of the situations in which he finds himself. On his first two returns home, Antuono displays no initiative whatsoever in managing the fairy-tale objects that the ogre presents him with and, above all, in mastering the magical formulas that unleash their secrets. He is capable, at most, of parroting the formulas indiscriminately. This obviously has disastrous consequences, since he tells the innkeeper not to use those very words and thus becomes an accomplice to his own loss of the objects. When he goes back to the ogre after losing the second object, the tablecloth, the ogre makes quite explicit, through a string of insults that link physical to linguistic incontinence, that Antuono's failures are a result of his lack of rhetorical savvy:

No saccio chi me tene che no te sborzo na lanterna, cannarone vesseniello, vocca pedetara, canna fraceta, culo de gallina, ta-tanaro, trommetta de la Vicaria, che d'ogne cosa iette lo banno, che vuommeche quant'hai 'n cuorpo e no puoie reiere le cicere! si tu stive zitto a la taverna no te soccedeva chello che t'è socciesso, ma pe farete la lengua comm'a taccariello de molino haie macenato la felicità che t'era venuta da ste mano. (p. 42)

(I don't know what keeps me from tearing out one of your eyes, fart-throat, gas-mouth, filthy gullet, hen's ass, tattler, court trumpeter: you make a public announcement of every private matter, you vomit whatever is in your body, and you can't even keep in chickpeas! If you had shut up at the inn, none of this would not have happened to you, but since you used your tongue like the sail of a windmill, you've ground to dust the happiness that this hand had given to you!)

And this time, Antuono—rising to the occasion as he accepts the third magic object, the club—finally dialogues shrewdly, if bizarrely, with the ogre: “Va c’aggio puosto la mola de lo sinno e saccio quanta para fanno tre buoie! no so’ chiù peccerillo, ca chi vo’ gabbare Antuono se vo’ vasare lo guveto!” (p. 42) (You’ll see, I’ve cut my wisdom teeth and I know how many pairs make three oxen! I’m not a little boy anymore and whoever wants to cheat Antuono must kiss his own elbow first!). On his third trip home, although the ogre has given him both parts of the command for the club—“Up, club!” and “Down, club!”—Antuono shows some, however minimal, astuteness when he gives away only half of the formula to the innkeeper.

What Antuono achieves when he uses the third object correctly, and by doing so regains the first two, is the passage from a passive acceptance of the

popular utopian myths of unlimited and unearned wealth and food, uncoupled with the rhetorical power to use them, to an aggressive retrieval and actualization of their powers.<sup>22</sup> Antuono finally learns, with the club, that its command “no fu parola . . . , ma arte de ’ncanto” (p. 44) (was not a word, but the art of enchantment). He now understands how to produce words that do not only describe enchantment, but are a form of enchantment themselves. This rite of passage does not bring him the adulthood in the form of social validation that is so frequently the fairy tale’s endpoint, but it does lead to his appropriation of the power to manipulate his magic objects, and reality, through an effective use of language.<sup>23</sup> He learns this power from the ogre—in this tale a figure of the master-artist of popular linguistic tradition—and Antuono’s journey home to Marigliano (a real town outside Naples) parallels Basile’s own initiatory journey through the traditions of folklore and dialect literature after a period of cultural apprenticeship spent experimenting with the instruments of these traditions. Initiation commonly comes about in the woods, it is true (and not only in the fairy-tale forest, but in the pastoral countryside, the chivalric “selva,” and so forth), but what is unique in this case is that the hero is helped by the standard “antagonist” that dwells there.

The ogre of this tale, then, plays the role of a magical helper. The true antagonist, which Antuono must conquer in order to return home, is his own uncontrolled and unsophisticated use of language. One of the standard characteristics of the wild man is an inability to speak, but this ogre is a master of “alternative” eloquence, his “wilderness” a laboratory for the elaboration of a new literary language.<sup>24</sup> In this first tale there are, in fact, many of Basile’s most memorable lists of insults, which set the stage for the rhetorical acrobatics (and the philologist’s meticulous attention to lexical variants) that permeate *Lo cunto*.<sup>25</sup> It is significant that the title of this tale, “Lo cunto dell’uerco,” appears in a number of other places in Basile’s dialect works: as the name of a dance (*Lo cunto*, p. 458); to refer to a long catalog of descriptions, or complaints (*Le Muse*, V, 510); and, most importantly, in the eclogue, “La tenta,” as a derogative term used, in the courtly “mondo all rovescia” criticized in this eclogue, to deride the falseness and artificiality of those who in reality speak clearly and ingeniously:<sup>26</sup>

Si n’ommo pe ventura  
 parla sperlito, chiacchiara e trascorre,  
 e fa pompa de ’nciegno e de loquela,  
 e dovunca lo tuocche e lo revuote  
 lo truove spierto e te responne a siesto,  
 sta tenta l’arreduce de manera,  
 ch n’auza no cappiello  
 de no parabolano cannarone,  
 de na canna de chiaveca,  
 d’uno che darria masto a le cecale,  
 c’ha chiù parole che non ha na pica,

che te 'ntrona la capo e te scervelleca,  
 co tante paparacchie e *filastoccole*, [emphasis added]  
 tanta *cunte dell'uerco*, [emphasis added]  
 e co tanta taluorne e *visse-visse*,  
 che, quanno mette chella lengua 'n vota  
 co na vocca de culo de gallina  
 te 'nfetta, te stordisce e t'ammoina.  
 (pp. 448–50)

(If by chance a man is clear of speech, talks and converses, making a display of great wit and eloquence, and from whatever angle you look at him you'll find he's knowledgeable and answers you by rule, this dye reduces him to the point where he acquires the reputation of a babbling chatterbox, of a sewer-mouth, of one who would have a thing or two to teach crickets, someone more wordy than a magpie, who makes your ears ring and your head ache with such nonsense, such nursery rhymes, such ogre tales, such complaining and whispering that, with his mouth like a chicken's ass, he lets loose a flood that poisons, stuns, and deafens you.)

In this skewed order, where everything is always made to *appear* the opposite of what it *is*, we are offered a hermeneutic key to the actual “tale of the ogre”: the conventional negativity of the ogre figure is revealed as a mere construct that serves to marginalize submerged traditions or social subjects and keep their “message” at a safe distance from civilization, just as the rhetorical labors of the most valid intellects are considered mere “nursery rhymes” or “ogre tales.”<sup>27</sup> In *Lo cunto* Basile literalizes this figure of speech—his works are in a thoroughly concrete sense “*cunte dell'uerco*”—and by so doing he collapses the gap between appearance and reality, at least in the form in which it exists in the society so fiercely satirized in the eclogues. The fictions of Basile's fairy-tale world thus become an ethical response to the feigning that runs rampant in the “real world.” In the same manner, the loquaciousness of the spinner of “*cunte dell'uerco*”—which in the social cosmos of the eclogues is akin to an illness—in the fantastic dimension of the tales not only reacquires its positive valence, it metamorphoses into an explosion of linguistic and stylistic virtuosity that has as its aim the valorization of a language and a tradition previously uncataloged in literary form.

Basile's ogres, no matter how ambivalently or even positively portrayed, are still always confined to a space of marginality. Whereas the ogre often has the role of critic of a world “upside down” and performs this function in the guise of a comically monstrous cross between buffoon and soothsayer, it is the fool, such as Antuono, who has the capacity to carry the ogre's message back to society. For fools are the other major figures of alterity of fairy tales. They typically appear as dim-witted protagonists who, against all odds and often aided by magical helpers encountered precisely because of their simplemindedness, ultimately

encounter success in the form of monetary fortune, marriage to royalty, or both. Their marginality is not so much physical or geographical, as in the case of the ogre, but rather social and mental. Fools nearly always have an ambiguous stance with regard to the world around them. Are they in it or outside of it? Do they not understand the situation in which they find themselves, or do they just pretend not to? Are their actions unjustifiable and irrational, or are they nurtured by a hidden logic that is merely different from the one the majority of others follows? Does their folly ultimately, and paradoxically, allow them to function better in society than its “normal” members? What is certain is that fools consistently transgress boundaries usually considered uncrossable, and in this role of transgressor, whether unconscious or artful, they often find themselves in the heart of “worlds upside down.”

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of “novelistic” discourse, considers at length this polemical nature of foolishness. “Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away. . . . [A]t its heart lies a polemical failure to understand someone else’s discourse, . . . a polemical failure to understand generally accepted, canonized, inveterately false languages with their lofty labels for things and events.”<sup>28</sup> And thus, as Vladimir Propp has noted, the fact that one is a fool “means not only that he is foolish, but also that he (*and consequently the narrative*) is not bound by the listeners’ norms and conducts of behavior.”<sup>29</sup> As such, the fool is a natural vehicle for critique or parody not only of social convention but also of literary modes. Ultimately, as Bakhtin has stressed, fools always “stand for” something else: “Their very appearance, everything they do or say, cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way, but must be grasped metaphorically. . . . [O]ne cannot take them literally, because they are not what they seem. . . . They are life’s maskers.”<sup>30</sup>

The foolish protagonists who appear in a number of Basile’s tales not only subvert the model of the virtuous and ingenious hero presented in other fairy tales. In doing so they question the coordinates of the culture within which that type of hero, however critically, moves and which the fool, on the other hand, refuses to understand. The very choice of a fool-tale such as “Lo cunto dell’uerco” to open *Lo cunto* points to the symbolic centrality of the fool in Basile’s fairy-tale world (as does the fact that two more of the first four tales of the first day have fools as their protagonists). Antuono’s folly, as we have seen, has a decidedly carnivalesque flavor: from the senseless questions that he puts to the ogre, to his treatment of the three magic objects that he comes to possess, to his final triumphant return to his mother’s arms, his every movement defies convention, if not logic. Moreover, the “world upside down” spirit that permeates this tale (the powers of the magic objects recall popular Land of Cockaigne fantasies, where all that is scarce in the real world—money, food, social justice—either abounds or is no longer necessary, and all that is painfully necessary in the real world is banished) sets the stage for the other tales of

triumphant simpletons who attain, despite their seeming lack of comprehension of the people and events that surround them, the most happy of endings.

Also significant is Antuono's felicitous alliance—and consequently, metaphorical contiguity—with an ogre, a figure whose role as “other” to the “civilized” world serves, as we have seen, not so much to highlight the positive aspects of the latter but, on the contrary, to ironically accent its disturbing barbarity. In fact, in some sense Basile's ogres and fools are ideal companions. Both are marginalized by society (the ogre in a concrete, physical fashion, the fool socially) and, likewise, both move in an ethical and epistemological dimension far removed from the fairy-tale status quo of kingdoms and courts. The fool, with his irrational but justified (in the case of fairy tales) belief in the impossible, his utopian openness to experiences from which those better equipped might shrink (such as apprenticeship with an ogre), his lack of laboriousness and, indeed, of any practical skill, has few of the traits commonly thought necessary to survive in society. And underlying his explicit eschewal of those survival skills is an implicit critique of that world.<sup>31</sup>

Tale III,5, “Lo scarafone, lo sorece e lo grillo” (The Cockroach, the Mouse and the Cricket) features the best example of a “carnivalizing” fool of this sort. Its structure depends, in fact, on a series of symbolic inversions and binarisms of the sort that characterize grotesque realism as defined by Bakhtin. We learn in the first lines of the tale that Nardiello is the doltish son of a very rich peasant—a reference to this emerging socioeconomic class (they live on the Vomero, a hill above Naples that was the site, at the time, of country houses and villas). Nardiello is characterized not only by his stupidity but by his rejection of the priorities that drive the society he lives in and that are personified by his father. As the tale opens we learn that he has consumed half of his father's savings in taverns, bordellos, and gambling-houses, where he is generally “kneaded like a pizza.” Miccone, his father, in order to get him away from what he sees as the root of the problem, sends him off with a hundred ducats to buy some steers at a fair, instructing him:

allontanate dalle accasiune, ca te scraste da lo vizio: remota la causa, desse chillo, se remmove l'effetto. Eccote perzò sti ciento docate: v'è a la fiera de Salierno e accattane tante ienche, ca 'n capo de tre o quattro anne farrimmo tante vuoie; fatte li vuoie, 'nce mettarrimmo a fare lo campo; fatto lo campo, 'nce darrimmo a fare mercanzia de grano e si 'nce 'matte na bona carestia mesurarimmo li scute a tommola e quanno mai autro te compro no titolo sopra na terra de quarche ammico e sarrai tu puro tritolato comm'a tante autre. Perzò attienne, figlio mio, ca ogne [cosa] capo ha, chi no accomenza non secoteia. (p. 538)

(If you keep yourself far from the occasion, you'll keep yourself far from the vice; if you get rid of the cause, said that fellow, you get rid of the effect. So here are a hundred ducats: go to the Salerno fair

and buy that many steers, so that in three or four years we'll have that many oxen; once we've got the oxen, we'll work the fields; once we've worked the fields, we'll start dealing in wheat, and if we meet up with a good famine we'll weigh our coins by the bushel, and at the very least I'll buy the title on some friend's land and you'll have a title like so many others. So be careful, my son, everything has a head; he who doesn't begin, can't continue.)

In this first episode a number of oppositions are apparent. Miccone is intent on accumulating wealth and moving up the social hierarchy (by buying a title of nobility), without worrying too much about how he does it; if a disaster such as a famine furthers his aims, all the better. Nardiello, on the other hand, spends his energies dispersing this wealth. Miccone has a rational, if cynical, way of structuring his existence ("everything has a head"); Nardiello is governed by his physical needs. In fact, Nardiello's frequenting of those three commonplaces of the comic-burlesque tradition—the tavern, the bordello, and the gambling house (we might remember Cecco Angiolieri's sonnets on the same subject)—constitutes an inversion of the order and containment that govern his father's world.

On the way to the fair Nardiello meets a fairy, who shows him a guitar-playing cockroach. Enthralled, Nardiello uses all his money to buy it. He returns home, is reprimanded by his father, but is then sent twice again to the fair. On the second trip he buys a dancing mouse, and on the third a singing cricket. All three of these animals also enter into the tale's scheme of inversions, for they are transformed, at least in the case of the first two, from domestic creatures usually associated with destruction or undoing to artists, cultural constructors.

After the third purchase, Nardiello's father sends him away for good with a sound beating, and the youth ends up in Lombardy at the court of a "great nobleman," Cenzone, whose daughter Milla has not laughed for seven years, and who has offered to give her in marriage to the man who makes her laugh. Cenzone has offered to give Milla in marriage to the man who makes her laugh. With the help of his three animals, Nardiello succeeds where no one else has, and the king, although he considers Nardiello "feccia dell'uommene" (p. 542) (the dregs of humanity), agrees to give him three days to consummate the marriage. If he is unsuccessful, he will be thrown to the lions. Nardiello, an expert consumer, declares that in three days he will not only consummate the marriage but also "consume" the daughter and the whole house. But the king slips him a sleeping pill each night, and after the third night Nardiello is thrown to the lions. In the face of imminent death he frees his magic animals, who loyally vow to help him escape the lions and regain Milla.

In the meantime the king has arranged for Milla to marry "a great German nobleman." Their wedding night is not being spent in very passionate style, however, for the bridegroom has eaten and drunk too much and falls asleep immediately. The cockroach enters into action at this point:

se ne sagliette chiano chiano pe lo pede de la travacca e remorchi-  
atose sotto coperta se 'nficcaie lesto lesto a lo tafanario de lo zito,  
servennolo de soppositario 'n forma tale che le spilaie de manera lo  
cuorpo, che potte dicere co lo Petrarca: *d'amor trasse inde un liquido  
sottile*. La zita, che 'ntese lo squacquare de lo vesentiero, *l'aura,  
l'odore, il refrigerio e l'ombra*, scetaie lo marito. (p. 546)

(he crawled quietly up the foot of the bed, made his way under the  
covers, and nimbly slipped into the bridegroom's ass, serving him  
a suppository that uncorked his body in such a way that one might  
have said, with Petrarch: "love drew from him a subtle liquid." The  
bride, who heard the rumbling of this dysentery, "the breeze and the  
fragrance and the coolness and the shade," woke her husband up).

The second night, although the German prepares an elaborate diaper to pro-  
tect himself from another such outpouring, the mouse and the cockroach  
collaborate:

arrivato sopra la facce de lo luoco, commenzaie a rosecare li panne e a  
farele no pertuso a leviello dell'autro, pe dove trasenno lo scarafone  
le fece n'otra cura medecinale de manera che fece no maro de  
liquido topazio e l'arabi fumme 'nfettarono lo palazzo. (p. 546)

(when the mouse had arrived in sight of his goal, he started to gnaw  
the cloth and to make a hole at the same level as that other one. The  
cockroach went in and administered some more of his medicine,  
so that a sea of liquid topaz flowed forth and the Arabian fumes  
infected the palace.)

Finally, on the third night, the exasperated German declares to his worried  
relatives, this time using the authority of Virgil:

Non dubitare . . . ca stanotte, si dovesse crepare, voglio stare sempre  
all'erta, non lassonnome vincere da lo suonno ed otra a chesto  
pensarrimmo che remmedio potimmo fare ad appilare lo connutto  
maistro, azzò non me se dica *tre volte cadde ed a la terza giacque!*  
(p. 548)

(Have no doubt . . . because tonight, even if I have to die for it,  
I intend to stay awake the whole time, and not let sleep win me  
over. Besides, we'll think of some way to stop up the main pipe, so  
that no one may say to me: "three times he fell and the third time,  
lay still!")<sup>32</sup>

He has a special wooden stopper made, gets into bed, and lies there motionlessly  
"pe trovarese lesto ad ogne recercata de stommaco" (p. 548) (so that he could be  
ready for any movement that his intestines might make). But the cricket sings  
him to sleep, and the mouse rubs mustard under his nose until he "commenzaie

a sternutare accossi forte che sbottaie lo tappo co tanta furia che, trovannose votato de spalle a la zita, le schiaffaie 'm petto accossi furioso che l'appe ad accidere" (p. 550) (began to sneeze so hard that the stopper flew out with such fury that, since he had his back to the bride, it hit her in the chest so violently that it almost killed her). The king now realizes the injustice he has done Nardiello, who, after he is turned into a handsome young man by his animals, is finally able to consummate his new life.

In their second job as magic helpers, Nardiello's animals revert back to their "natural" role as deconstructors, though this time not of domestic order but of the containment and order of the hierarchies that structure the world of the German nobleman. The bedroom scenes are dominated by images of the German's grotesque body: turned inside out by the uncontrollable diarrheic flow that the animals cause, voided of its substance and progressively degraded, despite the desperate attempts at closure, until the inversion culminates in the symbolic transformation of this great nobleman into an ass and his expulsion from the kingdom. (Before the third night his relatives tell him the cautionary tale of a man whose first two farts were diagnosed by doctors as "sanitatibus" and "ventositatibus," but the third as "asinitatibus.") And the undoing of the German's social and corporeal identity is accompanied by a similar inversion of the literary tradition that embodies the Platonic or courtly love that is made to show its underside in this episode: it is Petrarch himself who glosses the "accident."<sup>33</sup>

The "maturation" of Nardiello thus consists of his progression from being a negative agent of indiscriminate dispersion of his father's wealth to the "institutionalization" of this dispersion in the form of his possession of magic helpers who effect the dissipation of the German's bodily wealth and, symbolically, the wealth of the high tradition. Moreover, these inversions of social realities and cultural forms, sustained by the carnivalesque magic that the animals enact, provide the impetus not only for the transformation of Nardiello into a prince, but also the foundations for a literary model that retrieves an archaic narrative form and, in the process, carnivalizes the high tradition.

In these domesticated or mentorly ogres and peasant fools turned prosperous we can perhaps read a reaction to this period's neofeudalism in the form of a compensatory dream of social mobility and a valorization of marginalized social groups. But we must also consider Basile's tales in wider cultural terms: as participating in the baroque curiosity that questions conventional authorities and erodes strict categories and differentiations. Michele Rak has commented that from a historical point of view, one of the most suggestive aspects of Basile's work is "the documentation of the existence of other logics that are usually silenced, the exploration . . . of the Other: not only of icons of popular culture such as the ogre, the castle, and the dragon, but also of their apparent foreignness, of the idea of inventing difference and, therefore, of the freedom to recognize what is one's own."<sup>34</sup> The positive highlighting of difference that we find in *Lo cunto* culminates in the creation of a new genre resulting from



the intersections, contaminations, and negotiations between high and low cultures and languages, “good” characters and “bad,” ogres, fools, and kings. The relationship between the aggressively uncomprehending fool and the sage ogre of “Lo cunto delluerco” is, in short, an apt metaphor for Basile’s complex relationship with the wealth of popular tradition, and for his brilliant task of bringing it back to “civilization” in the form of the literary fairy tale.

### Notes

1. Joy Kenseth, ed., *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, N.H.: Hood Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 113 and 33. It is noted in this volume that before the sixteenth century “humanoid” monsters were generally considered to be of three types: members of generically monstrous races that lived at the margin of the civilized world, hybrid creatures born of breeding between humans and animals, and prodigies—divine signs.
2. For more on the general evolution of this figure, see Paolo Baldan, *Metamorfosi di un orco* (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 1983).
3. In this regard, Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* is exemplary. Freudian as well as Jungian analysis of fairy tales rests on the assumption that their simple stories actually hide much more complex plots: in the case of the Freudians, the coming of age of the child in the form of his or her grapplings with oedipal conflicts, sibling rivalry, and so forth; in the case of the Jungians, the archetypal struggles for individuation that usually feature attempts to come to terms with the animus and anima sides of the human unconscious.
4. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 53.
5. As examples of historical “others,” Frederic Jameson gives the “barbarian,” woman, oppressed classes and races, Jews, and communists. In the context of a discussion of Nietzsche’s unmasking of ethics as ideologically determined, Jameson later writes: “He [Nietzsche] demonstrated, indeed, that what is really meant by ‘the good’ is simply my own position as an unassailable power center, in terms of which the position of the Other, or of the weak, is repudiated or marginalized in practices which are then ultimately themselves formalized in the concept of evil” (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], p. 117).
6. Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 56.
7. Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 52.
8. Michele Rak has commented on how the Neapolitan tradition “intends to render literary the autonomy of a culture: its materials, rituals, myths, phraseology, various forms of wisdom. . . . [I]t intends to illuminate the conflicts between city and country and among the various groups that inhabit the city, and to stage the new negative myths of the modern city: peasants and ogres, the forest, wild animals, all emblems of an increasingly alien countryside.” See *Napoli gentile. La letteratura in “lingua napoletana” nella cultura barocca (1596–1632)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), p. 31.

9. According to a psychoanalytic interpretation, ogres represent the darker, unconscious, less socially controllable aspects of the hero's being that must be contained—symbolically, with the ogre's death—before the hero can come to terms with adult, “civilized” life.
10. Baldan, *Metamorfosi*, pp. 30–31.
11. Consider, for example, Piero Camporesi's comment that “the image of the ogre, which for a long time hangs over western culture like heavy remorse, through comic-grotesque representation is exorcised in an attempt at repression, by means of a typical mechanism that reduces a nightmare of collective consciousness to a children's bogeyman” (*Il pane selvaggio* [Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980], p. 38).
12. Giuseppe Cocchiara, *L'eterno selvaggio* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), p. 14.
13. Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 20 and 102.
14. Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea,” in *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), pp. 22, 37, and 31.
15. Hiram Haydn, “Il Controrinascimento e la natura della Natura,” in *Problemi del manierismo*, ed. Amedeo Quondam (Naples: Guida, 1975), p. 205. See also Piero Camporesi, *La maschera di Bertoldo* (rev. ed.; Milan: Garzanti, 1993), pp. 149–51.
16. Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 22. In one of Basile's tales, V,9, the Isola delle Orche is located “in the area of the Indies,” and in eighteenth-century French parodies of fairy tales, the ogre himself will even be explicitly linked to New World natives.
17. Giambattista Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, ed. Michele Rak (Milan: Garzanti, 1986), p. 378. All subsequent passages from *Lo cunto* are from this edition, with page numbers indicated in parentheses. All English translations are my own.
18. This tension between appearance and what lies behind it, between illusion and reality, is at the center of *Lo cunto*, and figures especially strongly in the anti-court critiques that are found throughout. But whereas in court a deceptively pleasant appearance masks a monstrous essence, in the case of this type of ogre it is the opposite: his hideous appearance hides a noble soul. Splendid substances hidden under repugnant exteriors are, of course, common enough in fairy tales, but usually the exteriors are ultimately shed; in the case of the ogre, however, his ugly appearance is an essential part of his being.
19. Bernheimer, *Wild Men*, p. 116.
20. See, for example, Gino Benzoni, who notes that “there was in circulation a simple wisdom that countered the inner calm of the man who has only himself to look after to the anguish of those dependent on a moody and capricious prince. The serenity of the simple life is preferred to the complications of pomp and etiquette, the candid expression of feelings to the onerous obligation of having to control them” (*Gli affanni della cultura. Intellettuali e potere nell'Italia della Controriforma e barocca* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978], p. 107).
21. It is pertinent to contrast Basile's tale with a better known version of the tale, the Grimms's, in which the three sons serve real apprenticeships with various tradesmen. Antuono, on the other hand, is totally cut off from the world of labor and responsible citizenry; in fact, he does as little that is useful for the ogre as he had done for his mother at home.

22. The donkey that defecates gold is, of course, a standard folkloric topos. Another representation of such a donkey, which supports the interpretation of Antuono's magic objects as figures of the popular, "unofficial" traditions that Basile retrieves, can be found in G. C. Cortese's *Viaggio di Parnaso* (1621). In the first canto the poet-traveler comes across a donkey who, instead of gold, lets go four dialect poems by Cortese himself. See Michele Rak, *Napoli gentile*, p. 174.
23. Rak notes how in Basile's tales "transformations are effected by means of the intervention of violent and capricious powers—impersonated by ogres and fairies, unpredictable concatenations of Fate, and the magical instruments of the learned. These three elements take turns in producing metamorphosis and betterment of social status" (*Napoli gentile*, p. 303).
24. "Virtually every Renaissance schoolboy read in Cicero's *De oratore* that only eloquence had been powerful enough 'to gather scattered mankind together in one place, to transplant human beings from a barbarous life in the wilderness to a civilized social system. . . . Eloquence, wrote Andrea Ugo of Siena in 1421, led wandering humanity from a savage, bestial existence to civilized culture" (Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, p. 20).
25. With regard to this tale, Nigro writes, "He shows off the lexical richness of Neapolitan. . . . The intensity of the stylistic application expresses the pyrotechnic potentiality of Naples' rich linguistic archive with a baroque frenzy" (Salvatore S. Nigro, "Lo cunto de li cunto di Giovan Battista Basile," in *Dal Cinquecento al Settecento*, vol. II of *Letteratura italiana. Le Opere*, gen. ed. Alberto Asor Rosa [Turin: Einaudi, 1993], p. 873). For example, Antuono's mother kicks him out of the house with these words: "'Che 'nce fai a sta casa, pane marditto? squaglia, piezzo de catapiezzo, sporchia maccabeo, sparafonna chianta-malanne, levamette da 'nante scola-vallane, ca me fuste cagnato a la connola e 'n cagno de no pipatiello pacioniello bello nennillo me 'nce fu puosto no maialone pappalasagne" (p. 32) (What are you doing in this house? May the bread you eat be cursed! Clear out, you piece of a lout, get lost, booby, take the plunge, troublemaker, disappear, chestnut-guzzler! Someone must have robbed the cradle and left you in it, since instead of a cute little chubby baby-doll I got a lasagna-devouring hog). Or when Antuono goes back to the ogre after his first unsuccessful attempt to bring his magic object home, the ogre "le fece na 'nfroata de zuco, ca s'avea lassato corrivare da no tavernaro, chiamandolo ascadeo, mamma-mia-'moccame-chisso, vozzacchio, sciagallo, tadeo, verlascio, piezzo d'anchione, scola-vallane, nsemprecone, catammaro e catarchio" (pp. 38–40) (gave him a juicy scolding when he heard he had let himself be fooled by an innkeeper, calling him a good-for-nothing, oh-mamma-mia-drink-this-up, bird-brain, bungler, idiot, piece of junk, noodle-head, chestnut-eater, simpleton, lout, and incompetent), and so forth.
26. Nigro, "Lo cunto," p. 875.
27. In the eclogue "La coppella," we find this telling description of one of the adulators' ploys: "si si n'uerco o n'Esuopo / dice ca si Narciso / e s'haie 'n facce no sfriso / iura ch'è nieo e na pentata cosa" (p. 250) (If you're an ogre or an Aesop, he'll say that you're Narcissus, and if you have a scar on your face, he'll swear that it's a beauty mark and a lovely thing). Thus, in this world of false appearances and deceptive exchanges, where an ogre may become a Narcissus, figuratively, so may a Narcissus become an ogre. Interestingly, immediately after the section in "La tenta" on the distorted perception of eloquence, there is another portrait, of those who

- choose to remain silent, that in turn suggests an alternative interpretation of the fool (specifically referred to as Antuono): "Ma s'un autro te stace zitto e mutto, / caglia, appila ed ammafara, / e se stipa la vocca pe le fico, / no lo siente na vota pipitare, / sta tenta te lo muta de colore, / ca n'è chiammato Antuono, babione, / muscio, piezzo d'anchione, mammalucco" (p. 450) (But if someone else is quiet and mute, silent, with his mouth shut and sealed so you don't hear a peep out of him, he's called Antuono, an idiot, a dull-wit, a simpleton, a noodle-head, a fool).
28. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 403.
  29. Propp, *Theory and History*, p. 26; emphasis added.
  30. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, p. 159.
  31. Bakhtin comments that the device of using a naive protagonist who does not understand the workings of the world "takes on great organizing potential when an exposure of vulgar conventionality is involved" (*Dialogic Imagination*, p. 164).
  32. The passages from Petrarch are from the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Rime sparse*), nos. 185 and 327 (following the numbering in Robert Durling's translation [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976]). The *Rerum*, as is well known, was one of the primary models for the Italian lyric tradition. The verse from the *Aeneid* is found at the end of Book 4; it is cited in the 1581 translation of Annibale Caro (Rak, *Lo cunto*, 555ns. 15, 16, and 18).
  33. Rak comments on how canonical classical and Tuscan authors were often used by writers in Neapolitan as low comic relief, but also as part of a general critique of literary and social institutions: "Erudite fragments are used for 'incorrect' topics such as defecation or sensuality, with the effect that the reigning literary ideology and its forms of celebration of political and religious powers are parodied." Another technique used at this time for addressing the ideology of literary production was the translation of classical authors into Neapolitan (*Napoli gentile*, pp. 135–36). See Camporesi, *la maschera di Bertoldo*, for discussion of other Italian attempts to turn official culture "upside down." The classic study on this subject remains, of course, Bakhtin's *Rabelais*.
  34. Michele Rak, "La tradizione letteraria popolare-dialettale napoletana tra la conquista spagnola e le rivoluzioni del 1647–48," in *Storia di Napoli*, vol. 7 (Naples: Società Editrice Napoletana, 1974), p. 531.

## CHAPTER 12

### *Reforming the Monster: Manzoni and the Grotesque*

ROBERT S. DOMBROSKI



As if inscribing a tombstone, Carlo Emilio Gadda writes at the beginning of his *Apologia manzoniana* (1927): “La mescolanza degli apporti storici e teoretici più disparati, di cui si finse e si finge tuttavia il nostro, bizzarro, imprevedibile vivere, egli ne avvertì la contaminazione grottesca.”<sup>1</sup> (He singled out the grotesque contamination present in the mixture of the most disparate historical and theoretical elements of which our bizarre, unpredictable life has fashioned itself.<sup>2</sup>) The subject in this convoluted sentence is, of course, Manzoni. The statement, with its implication that *I promessi sposi* is a “grotesque” novel, contradicts what every reader of Manzoni, including Gadda himself, believes to be the extraordinarily rational control that Manzoni has over his narrative materials—the “discrete rhetoric” that the author, in his preface to the novel, claims to use as a corrective to the “baroque” and “grotesque” prose of the manuscript he says he has discovered and rewritten.<sup>3</sup> Are Gadda’s words then to be taken simply as an attempt to project onto his beloved mentor his own poetics of the grotesque?

We can begin by looking at what Gadda is actually saying. Manzoni alerts his reader to the grotesque which is an effect of the contamination he sees in the mixture of the most disparate events and ideas. This melange is an objective constant in the world, a universal state of rupture that makes reality strange and unpredictable. Therefore, for Gadda, Manzoni has exposed the grotesque that exists in things: the possibility for distortion, the fusion of different realms of being, the coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, and repulsive elements that destroys the harmony and serenity of the whole. The grotesque, in Gadda’s account, is

an alien spirit that has entered into the soul of Manzoni's world, as unnatural as the talking stump in Dante's forest of the suicides.

I use Gadda's remark as a point of departure in a discussion of Manzoni that takes as its focus a complex strategy of containment of all those worldly eccentricities that venture beyond the control of human reason: that potential monster we must hold at bay, lest we become contaminated by its influence. This monster of unreason, we shall see, harbors dimensions that are both sexual and political. Readers of *I promessi sposi*, burdened as they are by tomes of commentary, will tend to ignore the simplest of all facts: from a sociological perspective, the institution most threatened in the novel is the family.

The scene of the grotesque in *I promessi sposi* is varied; it ranges from Manzoni's description of the "bravi" to the plague and its aftermath. It extends to Renzo's encounter with Azzecagarbugli, to Don Rodrigo's banquet, to the public calamities that befall Milan, to Lucia's kidnapping and imprisonment. Above all, the grotesque may be found in the description of the novel's pivotal characters and in those episodes considered by Manzoni to have far-reaching social relevance. I have chosen to discuss two such characters, Gertrude and the 'innominato,' and one such episode, admittedly minor, involving Renzo upon his entry into Milan. However, before I do, it would be useful to consider briefly the literary context in which Manzoni's approach to the grotesque is to be situated.

It is not by accident that the novel begins with a pastiche, the function of which is to parody the crude baroque prose of the original seventeenth-century manuscript.

L'Historia si può veramente deffinire una guerra illustre contro il Tempo . . . Nella quale si vedrà in angusto Teatro luttuose Tragedie d' horridi, e Scene di malvaggità grandiosa, con intermezi d' Imprese virtuose e buona' angeliche, opposte alle operationi diaboliche.<sup>4</sup>

(History may truly be defined as a famous War against Time. . . . Wherein ye shall see in a narrow Theatre sorrowful Tragedies of many Horrors, and Scenes of Magniloquent Wickedness.)<sup>5</sup>

Manzoni's beginning is perplexing, mainly because it is supposed to refer to a linguistic and stylistic practice considered to be "baroque." Yet no one minimally familiar with the vocabulary and syntax of seventeenth-century prose would make the mistake of attributing the passage to a writer of that century. Certainly, Manzoni's lapses can be forgiven, for in all pastiches anachronisms and minor dissonances are inevitable. Where Manzoni appears to show his hand the most is in the referential frame he has created. The literature he parodies, this literature that exhibits the horror, wickedness, and dark deeds of the devil, is the grotesque literature not of the sixteenth century but of his own age. In addition to the central place the grotesque occupied in the aesthetic discussions of the time (e.g., Friedrich Schlegel's *Brief über den Roman* and Goethe's essay on arabesques), its presence

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in the literature of European and American Romanticism was widespread, from Jean Paul Richter, to Ernst Hoffmann, to Edgar Allen Poe, to the English gothic novel and Walter Scott.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the idea of history as a war against time is more of a Romantic than a baroque conception, which refers directly to that negative sense of time that gave Romantic sensibility its distinctive trait and that before Romanticism one searches for in vain, especially in Italy, where time was “padre di ogni verità” (Machiavelli), “veritas filia temporis” (Bruno), and where the Vichian tradition was based on a conception of change over time. Manzoni’s own Providence, needless to say, works within time to establish the link between time and eternity.<sup>7</sup>

The point I want to make is that Manzoni’s literary polemics, however much they seem to refer to the seicento, have as their principal object the popular literature of the early nineteenth century, a literature in which the grotesque was prominent. I am referring to the *feuilleton* or *romanzo d’appendice*, the historical novel à la D’Azeglio and Guerrazzi, and its British antecedent, the gothic novel or *romanzo nero*.<sup>8</sup> It is this latter subgenre that primarily interests us here for the influence it had on Walter Scott, the writer Manzoni had most in mind during the composition of *I promessi sposi*.

The gothic novel is the forerunner of the modern horror story. Its privileged space is the medieval castle with all of its horrific apparatuses: spiral staircases, secret corridors, underground passageways, creaking doors, and dark prison cells. It is the space of the unconscious, of repressed desire and imaginary worlds, a place consecrated to sex and violence, to confusion and paradox—in sum to everything that opposes the comforts of a world governed by reason. This world, which found its best expression in the novels of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, reached Manzoni mainly through the novels of Walter Scott, whose fortunes in Italy at the beginning of the nineteenth century are noteworthy.<sup>9</sup> Manzoni, who read Scott in both French and Italian translations, experienced the fascination of his stories. We find many traces of that world—with its conflict between good and evil, malevolent and demonic characters, kidnapped virgins, duels, violence, mysterious castles, monasteries—in both *Fermo e Lucia* and in *I promessi sposi*.

But it is the way that this world and its grotesqueness is reproduced by Manzoni that is most important. In his approach to the grotesque, Manzoni fashions a new form of realistic narrative that supersedes the popular literature of his time, giving to the modern Italian novel a specific identity of its own, an identity as different from Scott and his predecessors as it is from Stendhal and Balzac. It is at the center of Manzoni’s process of rewriting the popular literature of his time that we can situate the problem of the grotesque.

To see how Manzoni positions himself before the grotesque let us turn first to the figure of the “Monaca di Monza,” Gertrude in *I promessi sposi* and Geltrude in *Fermo e Lucia*. In *Fermo e Lucia*, Geltrude seems to have emerged from the mysterious and satanic atmosphere of the gothic novel. Manzoni describes her as appearing ever more sinister and ferocious to a point that her

beauty seemed to disappear altogether. The evil in her altered her person in such a way that whoever looked at her was left with a disgusting memory:

il suo aspetto prendeva sempre più *non so che di sinistro, di feroce* quasi faceva scomparire ogni bellezza, o almeno la alterava di modo che chi avesse osservato quel volto in quel punto ne avrebbe conservata una immagine disgustosa per sempre.<sup>10</sup>

(Her features took on an ever more sinister and ferocious character, or, at least, they altered her figure so that whoever might have observed her face in that particular moment would have been left forever with a disgusting impression.)

At the same time, she belongs to the supernatural world of the convent. The abbess indeed partakes of both worlds, hence the confusion, the grotesqueness. In both versions of the novel Manzoni underscores the familiarity of her persona, which, upon scrutiny, begins to look strange, "singolare." In both his portraits of the nun, the beautiful and the bizarre are fused into a turbulent whole. Yet what is different in these descriptions illustrates the strategy of containment mentioned above. First let's look at Geltrude.

L'aspetto della Signora, d'una bellezza sbattuta, sfiorita alquanto, e direi quasi un po' conturbata, *ma* singolare, poteva mostrare venticinque anni. Un velo nero teso orizzontalmente sopra la testa scendeva a dritta e a manca dietro il volto, sotto il velo una benda di lino stringeva la fronte, al mezzo; e la parte che si vedeva diversamente *ma* non meno bianca sembrava un candido avorio posato in un nitido foglio di carta: *ma* quella fronte liscia ed elevata si corrugava di tratto in tratto quando due nerissimi sopracigli si ravvicinavano per tosto separarsi con un rapido movimento. Due occhi pur nerissimi si fissavano talvolta con una investigazione dominatrice, e talvolta si rivolgevano ad un tratto come per fuggire: v'era in quegli occhi un non so che di inquieto e di erratico, una espressione istantanea che annunciava qualche cosa di più vivo, di più recondito, talvolta di opposto a quello che suonavano le parole che quegli sguardi accompagnavano. Le guance pallidissime, ma delicate scendevano con una curva dolce ed eguale ad un mento rilevato appena come quello di una statua greca. Le labbra regolariissime, dolcemente prominenti, benché colorate appena d' un roseo tenue, spiccavano pure fra quel pallore; e i loro moti erano, come quelli degli occhi, vivi, inaspettati, pieni di espressione e di mistero. Una gorgiera bianca, increspata lasciava intravedere una striscia di collo bianco e tornito: la nera cocolla copriva il rimanente dell'alta persona, ma un portamento disinvolto, risoluto, rivelava o indicava, ad ogni rivolgimento, forme di alta e regolare proporzione, nel vestire stesso vi era qua e là qualche cosa di studiato, o di negletto,



di stranio insomma che osservato in uno colla espressione del volto dava alla Signora l'aspetto di una monaca singolare. La stoffa della cocolla e dei veli era piúfine che non s'usasse a monache, il seno era succinto con un certo garbo secolare, e dalla benda usciva sulla tempia manca l'estremità d'una ciocchetta di nerissimi capegli; il che mostrava o dimenticanza o trascuraggine di tener secondo la regola, sempre mozzate le chiome già recise nella cerimonia della vestizione. (*Fermo e Lucia*, pp. 315–16; emphasis added)

(In appearance the Signora looked about twenty-five-years old; her beauty flawed, somewhat wilted, and, I would say, troubled. A black veil, stretched across the top of her head, fell to the right and left of her face; under the veil a band of linen covered the middle of her forehead; and the part of her face that was visible, different but no less white, appeared as virgin ivory placed on a clean sheet of paper. But her smooth, high forehead became suddenly wrinkled when her black eyebrows twitched together in rapid movement. Two of the blackest eyes at times stared at you with arrogant inquiry, and, at times, suddenly turned away as if wanting to flee; there was something restless and erratic in her gaze, an instantaneous expression that announced something more lively, more secret, at times in contrast to the words that accompanied her glances. Her very pale, but delicate, cheeks descended in a sweet and balanced curve to her chin, which was somewhat prominent, as in a Greek statue. Her perfect lips protruded sweetly; although colored by the lightest shade of pink, they stood out against her pallor. Their movement, like that of her eyes, was lively, abrupt, and full of expression and mystery. A white, pleated ruff revealed a part of her white, well-formed neck; a black habit covered the rest of her lofty person, but a loose, resolute bearing revealed or indicated, in her every movement, a tall and regularly proportioned stature; in her dress there was here and there something both precise and neglectful, in sum, something strange that, together with her facial expression, gave the Signora the figure of a unique nun. The fabric of her habit and veils was finer than what one was accustomed to see with nuns; her bosom was laced with a certain secular flair.)

Now the portrait of Gertrude.

Il suo aspetto, che poteva dimostrare venticinque anni, faceva a prima vista un'impressione di bellezza, *ma* di una bellezza battuta e sfiorita e, direi quasi, scomposta. Un velo nero, sospeso e stirato orizzontalmente sulla testa, cadeva dalle due parti, discosto alquanto dal viso; sotto il velo, una bianchissima benda di lino cingeva, fino al mezzo, una fronte di diversa, *ma* non di inferiore bianchezza; un'altra benda a pieghe circondava il viso, e terminava

sotto il mento in un soggolo, che si stendeva alquanto sul petto, a coprire lo scollo d'un nero saio. *Ma* quella fronte si raggrinzava, come per una contrazione dolorosa; e allora due sopracigli neri si ravvicinavano, con un rapido movimento. Due occhi, neri anch'essi. Si fissano talora in viso alle persone, con un'investigazione superba; talora si chinavano in fretta, come per cercare un nascondiglio; in certi momenti, un attento osservatore avrebbe argomentato che chiedessero affetto, corrispondenza, pietà; altre volte avrebbe creduto coglierci la rivelazione istantanea d'un odio inveterato e compresso, un non so che di minaccioso e di feroce: quando restavano immobili e fissi senza attenzione, chi ci avrebbe immaginata una svogliatezza orgogliosa, che avrebbe potuto sospettarci il travaglio di un pensiero nascosto, d'una preoccupazione familiare all'animo, e più forte su quello degli oggetti circostanti. Le gote pallidissime scendevano con un contrario delicato e grazioso, *ma* alterato e reso mancante da una lenta estenuazione. Le labbra, quantunque appena tinte d'un roseo sbiadito, pure, spiccavano in quel pallore: i loro moti erano, come quegli degli occhi, subitanei, vivi, pieni d'espressione e di mistero. La grandezza ben formata della persona scompariva in un certo abbandono del portamento, o compariva figurata in certe mosse repentine, irregolari troppo risolte per una donna, non che per una monaca. Nel vestire stesso c'era qua e là qualcosa di studiato o di negletto, che annunciava una monaca singolare: la vita era attilata con una certa cura secolare. (*I promessi sposi*, p. 145; emphasis added)

(She looked about twenty-five-years old, and the first impression was one of beauty—a flawed beauty, however, which had lost its bloom and was almost ready to fall into decay. The black veil which was stretched across the top of her head fell on either side of her face, clear of her cheeks; under the veil a band of the whitest linen covered half her forehead, which was equally white in its different way. A second, pleated band framed her face, ending under her chin in a wimple, which hung down a little over her chest, covering the top of her black dress. That snowy forehead often wrinkled in an apparently painful spasm, and then her black eyebrows twitched rapidly together. Her eyes were very black. Sometimes they stared intently into your face, with arrogant inquiry; sometimes their gaze was rapidly lowered, as if in search of somewhere to hide. There were moments when an acute observer might have detected in them an appeal for affection, understanding and compassion; others when he might think he saw in them the instantaneous revelation of an inveterate, suppressed hatred, something strangely threatening and ferocious. Sometimes her eyes remained motionless, staring

at nothing: one observer might have thought her possessed by proud and slothful indifference, while another might suspect the affliction of a hidden sorrow, a preoccupation of long standing which had more power over her mind than the objects around her. The descending line of her pallid cheek followed a delicate and graceful curve, but its full beauty had begun to waste away. The color of her lips was the palest pink; and yet they stood out against the pallor of her skin. Their motions, like those of her eyes, were abrupt and lively, full of expression and mystery. Her figure was tall and shapely; but the effect was lost in a certain carelessness of posture, or spoilt by her movements, which were hasty, uneven and much too full of determination for a woman—let alone for a nun. Even in her dress, there was something here and there that showed too much or too little regard for her appearance; which suggested a somewhat unusual nun. Her waist was laced in with a care which could not be called unworldly.) (*The Betrothed*, pp. 170–71)

In the first description, the reader's attention is drawn to those aspects of the nun's persona that stand in contradiction to the office she holds. Her beauty appears somewhat ravaged; her forehead, against the composed background of her veil and band, bears the wrinkles of a frown; her gaze is dominating, yet fleeting; her eyes, disquieting and erratic; her cheeks pale yet delicate; her chin like that of a Greek statue; her lips perfect and sweetly protruding, colored lightly, like her eyes, mysterious. There is something ominous in this portrait; Geltrude seems to hold within her some dangerous, fearful mystery. And she is dangerous particularly because she is sexually attractive. One cannot miss the erotic protrusion of her pink lips set against the pallor of her cheeks—features not so different from those of the satanic women that populate the pages of the *romanzo nero*, who become the castrating, female vampires of modern horror. The grotesque in her person is just as essential to her being as her name, "La Signora," capitalized to show that despite her young age, she belongs to legend, to the mysterious and dark world of romance in which evil, like good, is an overarching force. Geltrude is even more dangerous because she is a metaphor that can be taken for an element of reality is, therefore, capable of escaping the rational control of its user. Defeated, as evil always is in popular literature, she lingers on to haunt us. Since she is not a product of history but of myth, she can return at will.

How do we contain, control, and thus deprive this force of its power? Notice that the principal difference between the two passages is one of perspective. In *Fermo e Lucia*, the narrator describes what he and the reader see. In *I promessi sposi*, he describes what he wants the reader to see: namely, that within this person there is a soul in conflict; in other words, the confusion her figure exhibits is not the result of a dual nature, but rather of other forces, historical and social, about which we will soon learn. The rewriting therefore amounts to

assigning the grotesque in Gertrude not to her being but to history. It is this historicization of the character that the description prepares us for. First, to extract her from legend, Manzoni does not refer to her as “La Signora”; if the term is used elsewhere in reference to her, it is used by her servants. And what is more it is not capitalized. Second, he deletes anything that could contribute to her idealization, as, for example, comparing her to a Greek statue. Third, he removes anything that could be construed as referring to an innate wickedness that displays itself in ambiguous features. Geltrude’s eyes have something disquieting and erratic about them that contradicted her words; Gertrude’s eyes appear at times to conceal shame and implore pity, understanding, and love, at times to convey a repressed hatred. Fourth, in *I promessi sposi* Manzoni cancels any erotic suggestion that the adjective “dolce” and the adverb “dolcemente” might have conveyed; one cannot help notice that “seno” (breast) in *Fermo* is replaced with “vita” (waist) in *I promessi sposi* in order to eliminate any and all sexual references to her persona.

The general sense of these corrections can be captured above all in Manzoni’s use of the conjunction “ma.” In *Fermo e Lucia* “ma” functions to underscore contradiction, while in *I promessi sposi* it calls attention to the troubled or problematic character of what has been affirmed. In the first sentence of *I promessi sposi*, for example, compare Gertrude’s beauty, which has been ravaged and thus has lost its bloom, to the ravaged, somewhat declining, and troubled beauty of “La Signora.” The strategy here is to restore Gertrude to her own history and to those real events that condition her life. This involves the secularization of her figure—its removal from the world of romance and intrigue and its insertion into a particular moment in history. This is one and the same as giving it a moral dimension, that is, the capacity to choose between right and wrong no matter how determinative her upbringing might have been. Manzoni’s first nun is estranged from herself, dehumanized, and thus not truly responsible for her actions. By assigning her predicament to historical causes, the grotesque in her figure becomes the effect of those causes; it is relegated to the status of a mere historical accident that illustrates the contingent, not universal, nature of the feudal institution in which that accident takes place. Manzoni is a high bourgeois writer who understands the importance for the upper class to move, however cautiously, in the direction of liberal capitalism. The mediating factor in such a transition is religion, in particular, Catholic morality, which immunizes society against the abuses of non-reason. While on the one hand *I promessi sposi* resembles the *feuilleton* and the *romanzo nero* in the conventions it deploys, on the other it dismantles systematically the mythical structure or dream mechanism regulating the narration that enables the petty-bourgeois and working-class reader to live vicariously through its heroes and villains.

Let us now turn to another register of the grotesque, one that involves Renzo. Renzo has landed in Milan in search of the Capuchin monastery that would give him hospitality. Renzo, the reader knows, is a simple, honest,

ingenuous young man from the mountains outside of Milan who has come to the city for the first time; thus he is a particularly suitable vehicle for the narrator to convey his dislike of popular rebellion or uprising. As Renzo walks through the city's eastern gate, he sees white lines on the ground that resemble snow, but, he thinks, could not be snow at that time of the year. He soon realizes it is flour, and he says to himself: "Grand'abbondanza . . . ci dev'essere a Milano, se straziano in questa maniera la grazia di Dio. Ci davan poi ad intendere che la carestia è per tutto" (p. 191) (They must be well off for food in Milan . . . if they misuse the bounty of God in this manner. And then they say there's famine every where!) (p.227). Then, at the steps of the Cross of St. Denis, he notices what at first glance seem to be stones, but which are loaves of bread scattered all about. Picking one up, he exclaims: "È pane davvero! . . . [C]osì lo seminano in questo paese? In quest'anno? Che sia il paese di cuccagna questo?" (p. 191) (It really is bread. . . . Do they throw it around like that in these parts, in a year like this? Is this the land of Cockaigne?) (p. 227). At this point the reader is presented, through the eyes of Renzo, with a grotesque spectacle. Renzo sees coming toward him a man, a woman, and a boy, carrying loads that seem too heavy for them:

I vestiti o gli stracci infarinati; infarinati i visi, e di più stravolti e accesi; e andavano non solo curvi, per il peso, ma sopra doglia, come se gli fossero state peste l' ossa. L' uomo reggeva a stento sulle spalle un gran sacco di farina, il quale, bucato qua e là, ne seminava un poco, a ogni intoppo, a ogni mossa disequilibrata. Ma più' sconcia era la figura della donna: un pancione smisurato, che pareva tenuto a fatica da due braccia piegate: come una pentolaccia a due manichi; e di sotto di quel pancione uscivan due gambe, nude fin sopra il ginocchio. (p. 192)

(Their clothes, or rather rags, were covered with flour; and there were streaks of flour on their faces, which were contorted and fiery red. They were bent double by the weight of their load; but apart from that there was something painful about their gait, as if their bones ached from a thrashing. The man's burden was a great sack of flour, which his shoulders could barely support. It had holes here and there, and flour dribbled out of them every time he stumbled or lost his balance. Much more unpleasant was the spectacle presented by the woman. Her arms were curved under the enormous mass of her belly, and seemed scarcely able to hold it up; it looked like a great earthenware jar with two handles. Below that belly came a pair of legs, naked to above the knee.) (pp. 227–28)

A second look shows Renzo, and us, the reason for the deformation. The woman had packed flour in her skirt, which she had taken from a bakery that was looted during the bread riots. It is noteworthy that in *Fermo e Lucia* Manzoni

represents exactly the same scene but with one significant difference: while he emphasizes the woman's strange figure, he makes no attempt to embellish it metaphorically with the image of the "pentolaccia a due manichi," limiting himself to mentioning her "pancia immensa." What borders on derision in *Fermo e Lucia* becomes downright scorn for the evil act of plundering in *I promessi sposi*.

What is important in this scene is the question of deception. The grotesque simile underlines a segment of social reality in which reality and illusion are linked. We as readers are made to enjoy Renzo's error because, on further examination, he, and we, are capable of unmasking it. Soon ahead in the narrative, Manzoni dispenses with Renzo's point of view to deal directly with the illusions and irrationality of the populace, who, ignorant of the laws governing the marketplace and in the form of a wild mob, commits one of its acts of popular justice "che sono delle peggio che si facciano in questo mondo" (p. 197) (which are among the worse acts of justice the world ever sees) (p. 234). In *Fermo e Lucia*, I should add, Manzoni's attitude toward the populace is notably different; there he is cautious in blaming it for its ignorance and resentment. By contrast, in *I promessi sposi* the grotesque stands for a social evil that is one and the same with the fearsome multitude in search of justice. We should not, however, conclude that the grotesque image of the proletarian family is a reactionary one. The deformation is a product of history and has yet to enter into the realm of Nature; thus it cannot become the object of an elemental hatred. Instead, as a product of history, the grotesque, a phenomenon that manifests itself beyond the control and comprehension of human reason, is subject to containment by the very same reason it defies. The odd appearance of this little group, the family's strange and uncontrolled expressions and eccentric movements, are exposed to the reality of a specific historical moment. More importantly, it is Renzo, the country yokel, whom Manzoni deploys to help the reader understand the absurdity of the bread riots. Renzo himself, our peasant hero from the hills, who in due course will enter into the world of business and live in peace and happiness with his small family, is the one who helps perform the task of containment.

To put this all differently, the terror of the grotesque, which in the more advanced countries of Europe is born out of the split between the extremes of property owners and property-less workers, in Italy—or, more precisely, in early nineteenth-century Lombardy—fades into caricature and, ultimately, benevolent humor. Because no organized threat to property owners and business has yet been mounted by the urban proletariat, the grotesque is deprived of a truly autonomous existence. Instead of killing the monster and therefore stopping history, Manzoni will reform it, and, depriving it of its grotesqueness, he will insert it into history's course. Evil has been swept away, as don Abbondio says, and Renzo and Lucia marry and have descendants.

But of all the pivotal characters in the novel, the one that seems to, most literally, step out of a gothic romance and inspire terror is not don Rodrigo—

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who is a petty villain and, in the last analysis, a comic figure—but rather the “innominato,” the figure that is a powerful metaphor for the accommodation of feudal and bourgeois values. In him, Manzoni’s utopia of a humane capitalism founded on Christian virtue becomes most apparent. Potentially a terrible lord, capable of deforming, barbarizing, and impoverishing society, the “innominato” plays a role that is one of civilizing and enrichment; his story, more than any other in the novel, is a story of formation or building.

Let us take a close look at how Manzoni constructs the “innominato”’s story. There are two intersecting registers: legend and history. The first contains numerous grotesque elements typical of the *romanzo nero*. First and foremost are the landscape and abode of this terrifying man. His castle is situated above a narrow, dismal valley (*valle angusta e uggiosa*), on the top of a peak near a rough mountain ridge (*un’aspra giogaia di monti*), surrounded by a wilderness of great rocks and precipices, a maze of chasms and cliffs (*massi, dirupi, un andirivieni di tane e di precipizi*). At the bottom of the valley lies a “torrentaccio” (an ugly torrent), and most of the wall of the opposite valley is made of “*schegge e macigni, erte ripide*” (boulders, splintered stone and steep declivities). The interior of the castle is also gothic, with dark, labyrinthine corridors (*andirivieni di corridoi bui*) and great rooms adorned with “*moschetti*,” “*sciabole*,” and “*partigiane*” (muskets, sabers, and halberds). This, of course, is just one part of the larger plot in which Manzoni utilizes a large number of gothic devices—such as the kidnapping of the virgin heroine and the machinations of a loathsome villain, in which the content of the grotesque is amply visible—in order to subvert the very mechanism of fantasy on which the popular imagination feeds. He does this by providing a precise and complete, historical and psychological, justification for every action and event.

It cannot escape the reader that the unnamed is an aristocrat. He lives in a castle and, as Ripamonti tells Manzoni, was no less powerful in wealth than in noble birth. First among the great ones of the city, he lived above the law, loved to command and was feared by everyone. It is equally important to note that this legendary and mysterious individual is unlike the other nobles of his time, such as don Rodrigo. In fact, the unnamed lacks the aristocrat’s conspicuous lifestyle: we do not see him at banquets, nor making love, nor in fancy dress. The only reference made to an activity commonly regarded as aristocratic, hunting, is metaphoric. When ordered to quit the country, instead of leaving in secrecy, he crossed the city on horseback, with a pack of hounds to the sound of hunting horns, again to show that he feared no living person. The unnamed’s greatness and power derived not only from his noble lineage, but also from some unknown, supernatural source: “*il suo nome significava qualcosa d’irresistibile, di strano, di favoloso*” (p. 301) (his name had become associated with the idea of something strange, irresistible and legendary) (p. 364). It is not hard to imagine how such a character would be capable of becoming a grotesque figure. His criminality could have been seen as the effect of an impersonal force, an alien and inhuman spirit that had entered his soul. What would be familiar and natural in his

person would suddenly become strange and ominous. We would be made to face the unreliability of our own world, and thus fear life, instead of death. This, of course, does not happen, nor could it happen with a Christian writer like Manzoni. Yet we must keep in mind the structure of such a possible outcome, typical of the modern horror genre, in order to better understand how Manzoni subverts that (potential) structure to create a figure no less unbelievable than the satanic and fantastic creatures that populate grotesque stories.

The “innominato” has been the subject of numerous studies, and there is no need to rehearse the long and complex process that leads to his eventful conversion and, thus, the unraveling of the plot. Instead, what I want to point out is that upon close scrutiny it is possible to view this figure as the reverse image—the other side of the coin, so to speak—of what has become the modern monster. If there is a focal point in the “innominato”’s story it is that of self-knowledge, the conquest of self through reflection, which results in the humanization of the ferocity that once governed him. The process involves the growth of a seed: the more it grows, the less interested the hero becomes in taking victims; the more he grows out of his old self, the more humble he becomes; the more his new self comes to the fore, the less space he needs to exercise his newly gotten power. The “innominato”’s story shares much of the structure of medieval legends; it is in fact an example of modern hagiography: the great lord will become Christ-like to save mankind.

By contrast, in the nineteenth century one of the figures that excited the popular imagination in developed, industrialized countries was Dracula, an aristocrat himself, who, even more than the “innominato,” did not live as an aristocrat. Dracula was man estranged from himself, dehumanized. He was dead yet not dead: an un-dead who managed to live by sucking the blood from the living. Accumulating victim after victim, he continually expanded his domain.

The most compelling interpretation of the Dracula legend I know of has been advanced by Franco Moretti in *Signs Taken for Wonders*. According to Moretti, the Dracula legend in all of its many variants is a metaphor for capital, a social product that has no body, which has exchange value but no use value. “Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”<sup>11</sup> Like capital, “Dracula is impelled towards a continuous growth, an unlimited expansion of his domain.”<sup>12</sup> But if we are to fully understand Dracula’s actions, we must link him specifically to a particular stage of capital and its development in a circumscribed geographical space—as for example, in the case of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. Moretti’s complex and insightful arguments are less pertinent to our theme than the perspective from which they arise. If it is useful to connect the monster to a specific historical moment in the development of capital, it seems that its reverse image, the “innominato,” would benefit from the same procedure.

If the vampire is a metaphor for capital, and if, as Moretti argues, Stoker’s Dracula is a metaphor for “the capital which, after lying ‘buried’ for



twenty long years of recession, rises again to set out on the irreversible road of concentration and monopoly,"<sup>13</sup> then the "innominato" is a metaphor for capital still imprisoned under foreign rule yet potentially beneficial and life-giving to a populace subjected to Austrian governance and control. Under French rule, the Italian nobility had gradually been deprived of its privileges, and it took part, albeit slowly, in the general economic reawakening of the country. At the same time it still worked to keep the social body rooted to the feudal past. The reforms it promoted were from the top down, for the purpose of maintaining the class structure to its benefit. In other words, it prevented the growth of capital and was an obstacle to bourgeois aspirations and productive capacities. The converted "innominato," by contrast, has left his old world of feudal prerogatives. He goes on to perform those acts that establish a new social relation: he becomes religious, dismisses his servants, and chooses an autonomous life in humble solitude as a benefactor of the poor. As a metaphor for emerging capital, he knows the importance of religion in containing the rebellious impulses of the populace. He also knows that servants are unproductive workers,<sup>14</sup> and that his real power derives from his newly gained freedom to act without constraint. However far-fetched this analogy may seem, it is indisputable that the "innominato" is governed by the same process of containment at work in the figure of Gertrude, notwithstanding the different functions commanded by these characters within the economy of the novel's plot.

If the exhibition and control of the grotesque is a strategy, what then is its final purpose? The answer is to reform the novel. For the French moralists Manzoni faithfully read, the novel was a source of corruption: "livres corrupteurs de la vie humaine" (books that corrupt human life) for Nicole, "divertissements criminels" (criminal amusements) for Bourdaloue.<sup>15</sup> The novel corrupted because it focused on passionate love. Manzoni's position was, of course, not as crude, yet it did not contradict the idea that love in the novel, if not managed correctly, is an occasion for sin. "Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse."<sup>16</sup> But while Dante, in his critique of courtly literature, intended to channel love into "caritas"—establish it as a principle of self-elevation—Manzoni believed that the joy of love could be found only in the sacred happiness of marriage. Behind Manzoni, we find not Dante but rather St. Augustine and Bossuet of the *Traité de la concupiscence*.

Salvatore Nigro has pointed out that the digression on love contained in *Fermo e Lucia*—but deleted from *I promessi sposi*—connects the passage on the temperance of "amore," "giocondo," and "lieto" (which the spirit of modern love would overdetermine) and the dark passions of Egidio and Gertrude—or, in Manzoni's words, "quel pudore che ignora se stesso, e somiglia al sospetto del fanciullo che trema nelle tenebre senza sapere che cosa ci sia da temere" (that modesty that ignores itself and resembles the suspicion of a child who trembles in the dark without knowing what there is to fear) and the "albero della scienza" (tree of science) that "aveva maturato un frutto amaro e schifoso"

([on which] had matured a bitter and disgusting fruit).<sup>17</sup> As Nigro remarks, on the one side we have narrative inhibition, on the other “narrative diffusion, sustained by a healthy and distancing pedagogy of horror,” and he quotes from *Fermo*:

Siamo stati più volte in dubbio se non convenisse stralciare dalla nostra storia queste turpi ed atroci avventure; ma esaminando l'impressione che ce n'era rimasta, . . . abbiamo trovato che era una impressione d'orrore; e ci é sembrato che la cognizione del male quando ne produce l'orrore sia non solo innocua ma utile.<sup>18</sup>

(More than once we have doubted whether it would not be better to delete these depraved and atrocious adventures from our story; but examining the effect that they leave . . . we find that it is an effect of horror; and it seemed to us that horror is useful and innocuous when it leads us to the awareness of evil.)

We no longer fear the horror; instead we are edified by it. However, as Nigro goes on to say, when Manzoni chooses not to include the digression on love in *I promessi sposi*, he passes his ideas on the subject matter of novels to Lucia, juxtaposing her story of true feelings that cannot be uttered (the rhetoric of reticence) with the eminently recountable story of Gertrude. Lucia's story is more difficult to tell because, unlike that of the nun, it was not “one of tyranny, deceit and suffering,” but rather of “love”:

Alla povera innocente quella storia [la sua] pareva più spinosa, più difficile da raccontarsi, di tutte quelle che aveva sentite, e che credesse di poter sentire dalla signora. In queste c'era tirannia, insidie, patimenti; cose brutte e dolorose, ma che pur si potevano nominare: nella sua c'era mescolato per tutto un sentimento, una parola, che non le pareva possibile di proferire, parlando di sé; e alla quale non avrebbe mai trovato da sostituire una perifrasi che non le paresse sfacciata: l'amore! (pp. 282–83).

(That part of her story seemed to the poor innocent girl to be a thornier subject, a more difficult tale to tell, than anything she had heard or expected to hear from the Signora. Gertrude's story was one of tyranny, deceit and suffering, which were ugly and dismal things enough, but still things you could talk about. But running through her own story was a theme, a feeling, a word which she felt she could never utter when speaking of herself, a word for which she could find no substitute that did not sound immodest in her own ears—the word “love.” (p. 340)

Here, one could say, the repressed has returned in the form of irony. The bold story of love is censored by the heroine, the only person capable of telling it,

and one wonders what it could have contained if not the grotesque, explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying.

By containing the grotesque within the boundaries of history and Catholic morality, *I promessi sposi* transforms the novel from an act of witchcraft to an act of reason. In so doing, it foregrounds the very things that characterize the *romanzo d'appendice*: the punishment of the guilty, the salvation of the innocent, and the display of social injustice. But now, deprived of their existence within the romance world of fantasy, these themes lose their impact on the mind of the petit bourgeois, who lived vicariously through them. Instead they become the property of a refined, cosmopolitan, intellectual class. When Gramsci, in his often cited comments, argues that Manzoni is not a popular writer—referring to the aristocratic character of Manzoni's Catholicism, his Jansenistic aristocratic stance, and his populist jesuitical paternalism—he has in his sights precisely the process of containment and control we have described. The sense of human life as the story of the world's suffering that Gadda highlights in *I promessi sposi* is no doubt there, but not in the form of agony and decay. It is there in a form restored to continuity, harmony, and homogeneity.

### Notes

1. Carlo Emilio Gadda, "Apologia manzoniana," in *Saggi Giornali Favole I*, ed. Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignani, and Dante Isella (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), p. 679; originally published in *Solaria*, 1 (January 1927): 39–48.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
3. Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, ed. Lanfranco Caretti (Milan: Mursia, 1966), p. 22. All quotations from *I promessi sposi* are taken from this edition.
4. Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, p. 21.
5. Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, trans. Bruce Penman (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 19. All translations of *I promessi sposi* are taken from this edition.
6. On the grotesque, see Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).
7. See Enrico De Negri, "Il gusto negativo del tempo e la Gegenwart romantica," in *Tra filosofia e letteratura* (Naples: Morano Editore, 1983), pp. 53–102.
8. See Massimo Romano, *Mitologia romantica e letteratura popolare: struttura e sociologia del romanzo d'appendice* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1977).
9. See F. Ruggieri Punzo, *Walter Scott in Italia. 1821–1971* (Bari: Laterza, 1975).
10. Alessandro Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia* (Florence: Sansoni, 1973), p. 317. All quotations from *Fermo e Lucia* are taken from this edition.
11. Karl Marx, cited in Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 90.
12. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 91.
13. Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 92.
14. Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 93.

15. See Salvatore Nigro, *La tabacchiera di Don Lisander. Saggio sui "Promessi sposi"* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 18–19.
16. Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia, Inferno*, Canto V, l. 137–38.
17. Cited from *Fermo e Lucia* by Nigro, *La tabacchiera*, p. 31.
18. Nigro, *La tabacchiera*, p. 31.

PART FOUR

*The Monster as  
Discourse*



## CHAPTER 13

### *The Monster as a Refugee*

GINEVRA BOMPIANI



Aiutami.  
Riconoscimi.  
Salutami.  
Col mio nome chiamami,  
non con quello del serpe  
Voglio risorgere.

(Hear me. Recognize me. Greet me. Call me by my name, not by the serpent's. I want to rise again.)

Anna Maria Ortese, *L'Iguana*

#### Monstrous Thought

Gilles Deleuze says: "A 'monster' is foremost a composite being. . . . [Though] 'monster' has a second meaning: something or someone whose extremely determinate nature allows the indeterminate fully to stand (the Goya-style monster, for instance). In this sense, thought is a monster."<sup>1</sup>

The word "monster" derives from the Indo-Iranian root "men," which also forms "memory" and "mental," and "strum," which is a wishful form. The original meaning is "sign," "prodigy"—something memorable, something which will eventually come true. When Deleuze says that "thought is a monster," he describes the word in its original sense.<sup>2</sup> Thought is a monster because "monsters" are the stuff thoughts are made of: something memorable, signs, thinkable things. They are the "dreams of reason" (Calderón de la Barca).

Why then does the Roget's Thesaurus give as synonyms for "monster" a series of derogatory words, such as horror, unspeakable, villain, brute, savage, fiend, demon, ghoul, and so on? How does a prodigy become an unspeakable horror?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for "monster": a divine portent; a malformed animal; an imaginary animal; a person of inhuman cruelty; an animal of huge size. Among these five meanings, three indicate an animal,

one a prodigy, and one a cruel person. The cruel person seems to stand between the animal and the prodigy; the cruel being is not recognized as belonging to the human genus and is outside humanity. "Outsider" gathers together all the other meanings.

Consider the modern word "refugee." The etymology is straightforward: "one who takes shelter in another country," from "fugere," to escape. *Roget's Thesaurus* lists these synonyms: foreigner, wanderer, outcast. And for "outcast" it lists expatriate, alien, displaced person, homeless, bandit, vagabond, outlaw, waif, reject, and rubbish. "Outsider" and "outcast" are two words that can bind together two disparate things: a unique being, composite in its nature, undetermined, unrelated, and self-existing, and a homeless and friendless runaway. Both are "out" of their motherland; both have no right to be where they are; both belong to a lost chain of beings.

### A Human Beast

In Anna Maria Ortese's novel *The Iguana*,<sup>3</sup> the two words "monster" and "refugee" meet in the strange being who inhabits the unknown and unmapped island of Ocaña in the Atlantic Ocean. The "being" is announced in the second chapter. On May 6 the weather and the ocean change.

Il tempo era sempre buono, ma non vi era più quello smagliante azzurro, quel sole, anzi la luce appariva vagamente velata, come se vi fossero nuvolette, che invece non c'erano. E il mare non era più turchese; aveva preso una tinta di argento brunito, come il dorso di un pesce, e al posto delle scaglie vi erano tante piccole onde. (p. 22)

(The weather was still good, but that startling blue had disappeared. The sun was different and its light seemed vaguely veiled, as though passing through scattered clouds. But the sky was clear. The sea too had lost its turquoise clarity and had taken on a hue of burnished silver, like the back of a fish: for scales a myriad of tiny waves moving in unison.) (p. 10)

The change of weather and the color of the sea are familiar signs of prodigy—a fish or a serpent is foreshadowed in the shape of the waves. As soon as Count Daddo, the novel's hero, sees the island and hears its name, he feels something "sgradevole e amaro" (p. 23) (unpleasant, even bitter) (p. 11), which renders him "pietoso" (compassionate). The island is not on the map, explains Daddo's seaman, because it is "a thing of the devil." A mystery has been announced with all its trappings: the devil, the snake, the unknown, the pity, the horror.

We will meet the "creature" in the next chapter, first in its title—as "The Beast"—then as a "little old woman," and finally as an Iguana who is the maidservant of three brothers living on the island: "una bestiola verdissima



e alta quanto un bambino, dall'apparente aspetto di una lucertola gigante, ma vestita da donna, con una sottanina scura" (p. 30) (In front of him was a bright green beast, about the height of a child—an enormous lizard from the look of her, but dressed in woman's clothes with a dark skirt) (p. 17).

The creature is a beast but her dress and demeanor are human. Her expression is all-too-human ("occhietti supplichevoli e fantasticanti" [p. 30]) [tiny eyes full of dreams and supplications] [p. 17]). She epitomizes humanness itself. Her humanness is just what makes her an animal. The creature will eventually be recognized *as an Iguana* when, receiving a present, to her expression of grief she adds one of bliss, hope, and vanity. At the same time, she is discovered to be very young, almost a child. The impression of old age depends on some "selvaggio abbandono."<sup>4</sup> This "savage abandonment" most nearly describes the thing we are looking at.

### The Iguana as a Monster

The iguana is a reptile, of the family of the "squamata" (scaly), like the chameleon, the basilisk, and the lizard. In folklore, the iguana appears in a series of stories where it might be replaced by a lizard, a frog, or a turtle. Ortese seems to think of the iguana as "iguana terrestris": a type that lives on the islands, under the earth, can stand on its feet, and can use its paws as hands. It is primarily vegetarian, but sometimes it eats small insects. This sort of iguana cannot cry. The basilisk, "the small king" who walks on the waters, belongs to this same family. In folklore, the basilisk's eyes produce a special, irresistible, deadly charm, while the iguana's eyes are harmless. Like all reptiles, iguanas are individualists; they live by themselves and do not seek the company of others.

Why should this iguana be a monster? The monster is a composite, a hybrid, which "allows the indeterminate fully to stand." Ortese's Iguana switches from the animal to the human. It can cry and it can talk; it can work and it can even count its money. But it is a special sort of monster. She is not half-beast and half-human, like the centaur or the siren: she is totally animal and totally human. She is at the same time very young and very old; a servant and a demon. She is at once mysterious, unique, and alluring, but also commonplace, shabby, and obscure. At first sight she is astonishing, at second pitiful.

Within a single paragraph the Iguana is human ("A tear descended from her mild, imperceptible eyes"), and animal ("Actually the tear had to rise, since her eyelids, like those of all iguanas, opened exclusively from the top"), old and young ("The creature he had addressed as 'little grandmother' was not even a full-grown girl!") (p. 31). In this alternation and linking of two ways of appearing, the Iguana reveals itself as a true Ortese creature.

In Ortese's books, things always have two ways of seeming: it is not their nature that changes, but the way they are looked at. Thus everything is at some time a "monster"; everything is unsettled, composite, unexpected, and fragile:

Dov'era stata quella scoria di disperazione, quella schiuma del nulla, o di secoli di segreta decomposizione, era sorto un giovane elegante, rapito in una nube di pace e di fantasticheria (p. 72).

(That shell of desperation, that froth on the surface of a nothingness or within a backwash of centuries of secret decomposition, had vanished and been replaced by an elegant youth with his mind in a fervent cloud of peace and playful fantasy.) (p. 66)

Things don't *change*; they *fall* or *rise*. They are always on the point of falling from Eden to Earth and rising back. Time unceasingly transforms Eden into Earth and Earth into Eden:

Tutto appariva e spariva e riappariva regolarmente, come gli astri, eternamente in viaggio, eternamente sommerso, non sapeva da che cosa . . . ciò che chiamiamo tempo.<sup>5</sup>

(Everything appeared and disappeared and reappeared with regularity, like the stars, eternally traveling, eternally submerged, she knew not by what . . . what we call time.)

Time and somebody's gaze. Every thing, every creature in Ortese's books is constantly looked at by some benevolent or malevolent bystander, or by both. Sometimes, as in the beautiful story "Un paio di occhiali" (A Pair of Glasses)—which appears in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (The Bay Does Not Bathe Naples)—the main character is a pair of glasses through which the world appears first in its glory, then in its dejection. Here, two pair of eyes watch the Iguana: those of Count Daddo, the book's protagonist and a visitor to Ocaña, and those of Ilario, the youngest and sweetest of the three brothers who are her masters on the island. Each looks at the other to see whether his face will "come alive with feelings similar to his own." But it is not to be: the Iguana, a miracle of "humble and radiant" humanity in the eyes of Count Daddo, is only a tiresome animal for the marquis, Ilario. Ilario dismisses Daddo: "Yes, I have to admit that our Iguana is a little nervous. . . . Later, Count, I'll tell you where we bought her" (p. 33). When these two pairs of eyes will have disappeared, at the end of the novel, the appearance of the Iguana will change again—and stay fixed in Mrs. Rubens's eyes—into a servant girl who combs her hair near Count Daddo's grave and never looks back: "guarda qualcosa, dietro di te, che non ritornerà, e ciò fa una cattiva impressione" (p. 179) (She's always looking, sort of behind you, at something missing that's never coming back) (p. 191). The Iguana is a monster in the proper sense of the word: something for the mind, a mental thing. She is a thought, a dream of reason.

### The Iguana as a Refugee

Where does the Iguana come from? She was bought somewhere, says don Ilario. She was a demon who appeared on the island first in the form of a

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little bird, then of a snake, and eventually, after many transformations, stayed and asked for wages—one of the brothers' jokes (p. 41). She was not born on the island. She does not belong to it.

In this she differs from Caliban, who was born on his island and knows it so well. Like Caliban she is a servant, even, as Trinculo and Stefano say, a "servant-monster."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, like Caliban she is a sort of slave: "Aveva la sensazione . . . che la libertà della Iguana era difficile, era impossibile" (p. 75) (he also felt . . . that the Iguana's liberation was a difficult goal to accomplish, entirely impossible) (p. 69). If Caliban is "a thing of darkness," the Iguana fears she is "uno spirito delle tenebre" (p. 94) (spirit of the shades) (p. 92), evil itself.<sup>7</sup> Like Caliban, the Iguana is one with Nature. Daddo wonders about her:

Può uno spirito immortale farsi intendere dalla irrazionale Natura?  
E che Cos'è questa Natura? Bene o male? Che cosa attende? Essa  
soffre, è chiaro. (p. 81)

(Is it possible in fact for an immortal spirit to make itself understood  
in a dialog with irrational Nature? And what is it, this thing I'm  
calling Nature? Is it good or evil? What are its needs and demands  
and expectations? It's clear that Nature suffers.) (p. 76)

But Caliban is a native on a foreign island. He is the natural victim of travelers, invaders, colonizers. The Iguana is a foreigner, an expatriate, a refugee, and the natural victim of dwellers, farmers, and landlords.

As a servant, the Iguana has other forerunners: all the animal helpers of fairy tales. But while animal helpers choose to aid their friends, the Iguana is not free in her service. (She reminds us of another famous iguana: captured and tied by the children in Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*, it scratches and rummages all night to free itself from the string that holds it by the neck, and at the end of the play it is freed.)

There are many of the Iguana's kin in the series of paintings made by Carpaccio for La Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice (1502–7). One of them is called "Il trionfo di San Giorgio" (The Triumph of St. George). Here St. George has defeated the dragon and tied it by the neck with the belt of the princess; the dragon waits humbly for the final blow. There is a great likeness between Carpaccio's dragon and the Iguana. It is not just a physical likeness: the almost human prostration of the body and the agonizing expression of the muzzle denote consciousness of ruin—a downfall from pride and agility. In zoology, the flying dragon (resembling a large insect with tail and wings) belongs to the iguana family. And so does the basilisk, which appears in another Carpaccio painting of the same series, "San Trifone esorcizza la figlia dell'imperatore Giordano" (St. Trifon Exorcises the Daughter of Emperor Giordano), where the young Trifon frees the daughter of the emperor from her demon, a vain and arrogant basilisk.

Vain and humble, demonic and pitiful, a fantasy and a slave, the Iguana gathers all the traits of her predecessors, with two differences. She does not

want to flee, to be freed, to go back to where she belongs. And, more human still, she is afraid of herself (p. 94). And here we touch the intimate being of the Iguana. In a most beautiful section of a chapter called "Il terrore del 'male'" (Fear of Evil), Ortese describes a crescendo of horror: the first step is the doom "di chi è posto da Dio, o dalla propria ambizione (questo non è ancor chiaro) in continua lotta con la perversità" (p. 95) (of people who have been thrown by God or their own ambitions [this is not yet clear] into continual conflict with perversity) (p. 93). But worse is "lo strazio della Perversità e Malvagità medesima, impossibilitata, per ragioni diremo matematiche, a lottare con sé, sopportare l'orrore della propria disperata presenza" (p. 95) (the desperate plight of Perversity and Wickedness itself, deprived for virtually mathematical reasons of all possible struggle with itself, or of flight from itself, therefore condemned to the constant horror of its own desperate presence) (p. 93). Yet this is not the greatest horror, because, if you were born within it, "non vi è, infatti, orrore che . . . non si trasformi col tempo in abitudine e rassegnata indifferenza, cioè a dire in una sorta di degradata felicità" (p. 95) (there is no such thing as a horror that won't, in the course of time, transform itself into habit, and . . . a degraded kind of happiness)(p. 93).

Ma se colui che, dopo, fu riconosciuto come il Male, non era, all'origine, considerato tale, ma tutt'altro, era baciato e accarezzato e gli si fissavano in volto allegri sguardi azzurri, e tutto cantava intorno a lui un canto di amicizia e soavità; se colui, improvvisamente, seppe che vi era stato errore, seppe di essere non il Bene, ma il Male medesimo, la vergogna, la malvagità, e spinto in un corridoio di solitudine non vide in fondo al cammino che la forca: sappi, Lettore, che solo costui, che dapprima non era considerato il Male, e dopo fu indicato come il Male medesimo, solo costui sa cos'è il freddo mortale del Male. (p. 95)

(But if someone is later recognized as Evil itself and was not formerly considered such, having indeed been held to be something quite the contrary, worthy of kisses and caresses and gazed upon with happy blue-eyed smiles and every surrounding nuance singing a song of friendship and gentle consideration; if such a being were suddenly made to understand that there had been a monstrous error, that rather than loved as the incarnation of Good he was meant to be despised as the incarnation of Evil, shame, and wickedness, as the very Devil himself, and thus to be driven into a tunnel of solitude that can lead to no end but a gallows—you have to see that only such a creature, first revered as everything other than Evil and later decried as the Devil himself, only such a creature knows the whole mortal cold of Evil.) (pp. 93–94)

This is the heart of the matter. It is not important where the Iguana comes from (it is even possible that she was born on the island after all), but that she

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was born and nurtured in a place where she was kissed, loved, and looked at with smiles and gentle consideration, and now suffers cold and solitude. Thus her situation is not restricted to her story but is the fate of everyone who exchanges his homeland for a land of cold and solitude, for a place where he suddenly becomes the incarnation of evil, shame, and wickedness. You can be exiled in your homeland; you can be a refugee in your own abode (like Caliban, the American Indians, or the Palestinians). You are an exile whenever your own land ceases to recognize you as its lord and master.

This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,  
Thou strok'st me and made much of me.<sup>8</sup>

### The Ban

Salic law excluded the transgressor from the community, and through a ban made him a “friedlos,” a “bandit,” “un bandito,” whom anyone could kill without committing homicide.<sup>9</sup> From that moment, he did not belong to the human genus; he was called “Wargus” and assimilated to the “werewolf,” the “loup-garou,” “il lupo mannaro.” Giorgio Agamben writes:

What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf . . . is decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.<sup>10</sup>

We now see that the monster is not only the creature of myths and fairy tales, the product of dreams and fears, but a political creature, the product of human laws, rejected by a self-defending community. What is important here, as Agamben says, is the threshold between Nature and law, animal and man, which makes of the monster a sort of refugee, of the refugee a sort of monster. What transforms a man into a werewolf, a monster, is the *ban*. The “banditi” (bandits) were the first exiles: wanderers and outlaws, homeless and stateless, unwelcome and unknown.

A ban is a proclamation depriving a man of his rights and his social group. From the time of the Geneva Conference of 1951, a very similar, yet reversed, piece of paper transforms a man into a refugee. The Geneva Convention (followed by the Protocol of 1967) defines the term “refugee” and the rights he

acquires in his new country. By 1990, 107 nations had accepted the convention and the protocol; but as the stream of refugees has been constantly growing, opinion has turned around. Currently many European states have decided to stop the flow of refugees by preventing their entrance. At the end of April 1995, and again in 1997, the Italian government sent its army to the southern coast to prevent Albanians from swarming ashore. This was done in compliance with new European laws governing the status of refugees, but the subtext of those laws is the equation of refugees and outlaws. We witness a new racism. The equivalence of outlaws, exiles, bandits, and werewolves is once more part of our everyday life. Refugees are now what the "banditi" once were. They have a special status; they do not belong to any state, and their lives are unsafe. You can do what you want with them, yet somehow they are sacred. You cannot welcome them, you cannot reject them. Their shadow spreads over the Earth, mocks its institutions, scorns the idea of nations. Thanks to them the face of the Earth is changing, reducing its framework of frontiers and boundaries to a fossilized skull.

There is a special dependence and a special independence which is peculiar to these outcasts. Monsters could not produce their food, and, in ancient stories, just claimed it: their hosts had to provide them with their daughters and children, until a saint or hero came to rescue them from their uncomfortable guest. Refugees have no right to a proper job, and, in order to survive, are left to their own resources. A refugee, like Caliban or the Iguana, makes a perfect servant who does not want to work. He has a right to everything because he possesses nothing. Like Caliban, the refugee was the king of his land. Like Caliban he can say: "I am all the subjects that you have, / which first was mine own king."<sup>11</sup> Every refugee is in himself a "once and future king."

This, again, makes the refugee a monster. For the monster is the occasion to step out of the framework. He has no face value. Not only does he not belong to the country he dwells in, he does not belong to any recognized form, or shape, or frame, or pattern; he has no copy, no analogue, no prototype, no model, not even a caricature. He is unpredictable, unsettled, unexpected, unstable, undetermined, untested, unexplained. The refugee belongs to his swarm until he becomes a refugee—until the country he lands in recognizes him as the unrecognized, the nonentity, the nonexistent. At that moment he becomes "one and only." He is the one who does not belong, the only animal with no territory, the guest, the servant, the fool.

### Thought Is Our House

When the Iguana was a baby she was told "that monsters lurked everywhere, and you had better be careful." Then, little by little, comes the horrible suspicion that she herself is evil, she herself is the monster. That is why she is afraid of herself. What makes her a monster is her ambiguous status—both animal and human, between Nature and thought: "Dunque essa non era una

così semplice bestiolina, come aveva finora creduto, e anzi si poteva paragonare a una vera, per quanto decaduta, creatura umana" (p. 111) (So she wasn't so simple a little beast as he had previously believed. She could even, so it seemed, be compared to the figure of what amounted to a true human being, no matter how depraved) (p. 111).

But where does the animal end and the human being commence? Only "the greatest philosophers" can begin to tell us. Yet, reasoning with himself, Daddo reaches the conviction that "umano è tutto ciò che può lamentarsi, e sub-umano (o animale) tutto ciò che non cura, o addirittura provoca, quel lamento" (p. 112) (the human consists of everything that can voice a lament, whereas subhumanity [or animal life] comprises everything that refuses to assuage that lament, *or even provokes it*) (p. 112; emphasis added). We hear in these words an echo of the great Italian poet Leopardi, when, in his "Dialogo della natura e di un'anima" (Dialogue between Nature and a Soul)—which appears in the *Operette morali*—Nature tells the soul: "Tutte le anime degli uomini sono assegnate in preda all'infelicità, senza mia colpa" (All the souls of men are destined to fall prey to unhappiness, through no fault of mine). And in Leopardi's "Dialogo della natura e di un Islandese" (Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelander), Nature explains her perfect indifference to human suffering: "Quando io vi offendo in qualunque modo e con qual si sia mezzo, io non me ne avveggo" (When I offend you in any way and by any means, I do not notice it).

In her *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, Ortese says: "È la natura . . . questo genio materno . . . che regola la vita e organizza i dolori di queste regioni"<sup>12</sup> (it is Nature, this maternal spirit, who regulates life and organizes the sorrows of these places). In a 1977 interview, republished as a postface to *L'Iguana*, Ortese says that Nature is responsible for all the misery and oppression of the human being. Nature "exists but is not real"; what is real is thought. To become real (human), Nature and society must be thought again ("ripensate"). Man himself must be thought again, or he will be lost in Nature and become unreal. Only *thought* Nature, second nature, is real:

L'Universo,—o gli Universi,—*sembrano* dunque il vero Irreale, il luogo non pensabile o non pensato. . . . la natura—animali, alberi,—*sono* l'uomo senza la difesa dell'intelligenza razionale, *sono* l'uomo senza tempo, l'uomo che sogna.<sup>13</sup>

(The universe, or the universes, *seem* therefore to be the true unreal, the unthinkable place or unthought place. . . . Nature—animals, trees—*are* man without the defense of rational intelligence; they *are* man without time, man dreaming.

This then is the beast, the Iguana: pure pain without reason, mankind at the mercy of its dreams. What makes the Iguana a monster is the end of Ilario's love for her; at this moment she realizes that paradise is over. A little later, she sees herself in a piece of broken mirror, and discovers that she is "tutta verde

e brutta, un vero serpente" (p. 127) (all green and ugly, nothing but a serpent) (p. 130).

The Marquis Ilario is also a monster; just as the Iguana is more than an animal, Ilario is not all human: "E se il marchese era invece nel caso opposto, cominciando cioè a non essere, nonché marchese, uomo" (p. 112) (And if the marquis for his part . . . were in the opposite situation—if he were ceasing, that's to say, to be a human being, let alone a Marquis) (pp. 112–13). They both "no longer lay within the order of things"; they both have "to be numbered among the victims of suffering" (p. 112). Like the Iguana, Ilario is young and old, human and less than human. Like the Iguana he is for sale (Io stesso sono in vendita), and there is something of evil in his innocence.

Ilario and the Iguana are both on the threshold between Nature and thought, evil and suffering, real and unreal. If Nature is not real and there is no such thing as "the natural," a human being is never in its natural place, he can never be "at home." Thought is its only house:

Non suo, non dell'uomo,—mi appare l'Universo quando lo penso,  
non tanto alla luce della ragione umana, ma di fronte ad essa. Un  
luogo totalmente lontano dalla ragione, dove la ragione non ha  
senso, un luogo nemico, profondo, senza luce, senza indicazioni,  
senza direzioni, senza nomi.<sup>14</sup>

(Not his, not of man does the universe seem to me when I ponder  
it, not so much lit by human reason, but in the face of it. A place  
totally afar from reason, where reason makes no sense, an enemy  
place, deep, without light, without signposts, without directions,  
without names.)

Exile is man's condition: he cannot get out of it, or go back, because there is nowhere to go back to. He must turn his back on Nature and build his house outside of it, in a *second Nature*. Writing and reading are his real house. Without what Ortese calls "l'espressività," the human being "lives in a place which is not its own."

The monster is never at home, neither in Nature nor in thought. The Iguana is a deteriorated human being, a degenerated thought. She has fallen from pride to nothingness, and Nature is her refuge. If man is an exile from Nature, finding his home in thought, the Iguana is an exile from the human condition, finding her home in Nature.

### The Little Dragon

Ortese's very beautiful book, *Il cardillo addolorato* (The Grieving Goldfinch) is full of strange beings, half-human, half-demon, half-alive, and half-dead, whose names and natures change all the time. All the love of the mysterious heroine goes to them. They are something like brothers, or children, or small animals, just like the Iguana. Why are these creatures so beloved?<sup>15</sup>



Why, if Nature is the source of pain, the cause of all suffering, why are its creatures the most desperately beloved in Ortese's books?

Another work of hers, *In sonno e in veglia* (Sleeping and Waking) (1987)—where we find a creature somehow similar to the Iguana, a small will-o'-the-wisp or goblin—ends with a conversation called “Piccolo drago.” It recounts a dream the author had when she was a child. Her grandmother tells the children that a dragon awaits them in the next room. Anna Maria walks bravely into the room and sees a small dragon, a sort of crocodile (who looks a lot like the Iguana): “Una specie di coccodrillo, col petto bianco, la bocca rossa aperta, e occhi infinitamente affettuosi, benevoli”<sup>16</sup> (A kind of crocodile, with a white chest, a red, open mouth, and infinitely affectionate, benevolent eyes). While she stares at him, wondering how such a good creature could be dangerous, the archangel Michael emerges from the wall and gives her a sword with which to kill the dragon. She slays the creature, and while he lies dying he tells her, “I loved you, I had a present for you . . . and you harmed me” (p. 169). After that dream, something changes within Anna Maria.

Mutai dentro di me, nel senso che guardai il bel San Michele con orrore e identifichai l'Ordine celeste (in breve: la salvezza), con una spietatezza indicibile. D'allora, . . . ogni volta che sentivo il gemito di una bestia, mi sentivo rimescolare. . . . E non potei mai più pensare di essere “buona,” una creatura come loro. . . . Avevo un peccato. Tutti gli uomini avevano un peccato e un debito immenso da pagare. (p. 169)

(I was transformed within, in the sense that I looked at the handsome St. Michael with horror and I identified the celestial order [in short: salvation] with unutterable cruelty. From that moment on, . . . whenever I would hear the cry of a beast, I would churn with emotion. . . . And I could never again think of myself as “good,” as a creature like them.)

This originary little dragon has certainly inspired many of Ortese's stories; it has become the representative of beasts, of animality itself (not solidarity with it but remorse).

But I believe there are other reasons for her choice. Whether Ortese had in mind the Carpaccio dragon (she may have seen it when she lived in Venice) or not, in all the legends, from Perseus to St. George, the dragon is always killed. He is the natural victim men chose to identify with evil:

Per distruggerli con assoluta libertà, inventa un diritto d'anima: ecco San Michele, l'Ordine Celeste, il Dovere di distruggere il Male. Il Drago è il male: come principe di tutte le Bestie. Sia (dunque) distrutto il Drago! E tutte le Bestie! (p. 170)

(In order to destroy them with absolute liberty, he invents a right to a soul: then we get St. Michael, the celestial order, the duty to

destroy evil. The dragon is evil itself, as the prince of all the beasts. Let [then] the dragon be destroyed! And all the beasts!)

The reason man wants to harm and kill animals is his peculiar way of looking at things: he is envious. Envy is an important clue in Ortese's writings. But what does man envy?

Direi che questo grande Abitante abbia invidia degli Angeli, dei Santi, degli Arcangeli: e insomma di tutte le reali Dominazioni. Fra queste, metto i Draghi, gli Uccelli, e tutti gli strani e gentili Animali. . . . Queste creature sono infatti assolutamente innocenti e quindi superiori. É l'innocenza che l'uomo invidia eppure odia. (pp. 171-72)

(I would say that this great dweller envies the angels, the saints, the archangels, and indeed all real dominations. Among these I include dragons, the birds, and all of the strange and gentle animals. . . . These creatures are in fact absolutely innocent and therefore superior. It is innocence that man envies and hates.)

Man envies the beast as the second-born son envies his elder brother. For animals and angels (as the Bible tells us) are our elder brothers, and man is an eternal Cain to them. Angels and animals belong to the same family: dragons, iguanas, goblins are their deputies. And not only *their* deputies, but the deputies of all people (not men, but mankind) who are exploited, deported, sold, and purchased; all the people on whom man exercises power and ownership—the infinite tribe of the homeless.

La vita come cosa—l'uomo come suo proprietario—l'uso della Terra e di tutte le sue creature, come diritto assoluto del proprietario. Sistemazione di territori, sfruttamento della terra, deportazione e uso di popoli—di esseri parlanti o meno—dipendono da questa credenza delittuosa: che la Vita sia una cosa—invece di un respiro e un sogno—e la proprietà (su tale respiro e sogno), un diritto. (p. 176)

(Life as a thing—man as its owner—the use of the Earth and of all its creatures, as the absolute right of the owner. The dividing up of territories, exploiting of the soil, the deporting and use of peoples—of speaking or not-speaking beings—depends on this criminal belief: that life is a thing—rather than a breath and a dream—and that owning that breath and dream is a right.)

For Ortese, the world is a dream, pure imagination—and so is life. The dragon, the monsters, imaginary beings, are in the truth of things. They do not make us believe in their reality but in their truth, in their pain.

Ortese criticizes Marx for discovering only one sort of slavery and for overlooking the main fraud: that the world is not matter but dream. This delusion is responsible for making men think they have the right to transform the world into merchandise. The world is “breath, dream, vision . . . it does not belong” (p. 176).

Comprare la realtà (territori, uomini, le dolci Bestie), per trasformarla in merce, è come trafficare in arcobaleni, canti di usignoli, gemiti d'erba che cresce o sente il passaggio del vento. Diciamo che il Mercante, o Padrone, è quindi, fondamentalmente, un uomo, o una razza, male o nulla informata. (p. 178)

(To buy reality [territories, men, the sweet beasts] in order to transform it into commodities is like trying to sell rainbows or the song of the nightingale, the sighs of the grass as it grows or feels the passage of the wind. Let's say the merchant, or owner, is therefore, fundamentally, a man, or a race, who knows little or nothing at all.)

Under this delusion, we see streams of animals taken to the slaughterhouse, streams of men driven back to sea.

### Notes

1. “‘Monstre,’ c’est d’abord un être composite. . . . ‘Monstre’ a un second sens: quelque chose ou quelqu’un dont l’extrême détermination laisse subsister pleinement l’indéterminé (par exemple, un monstre à la Goya). En ce sens, la pensée est un monstre.” Gilles Deleuze, “Réponses à une série de questions (de Arnaud Villani).”
2. *Dizionario Etimologico*, ed. Giacomo Devoto (Florence: Le Monnier, 1968).
3. Anna Maria Ortese, *L'Iguana* (1965; Milan: Adelphi, 1986). All citations are from the 1986 edition. Translations are drawn from *The Iguana*, trans. Henry Martin (Kingston: McPherson, 1987). Minor changes in the English translation will be noted. All citations to these editions will appear in the body of the text. All translations of Ortese's other publications are Keala Jewell's.
4. Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 32; “savage loneliness” (*The Iguana*, p. 19), but also “abandonment.”
5. Anna Maria Ortese, *I giorni del cielo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1958).
6. *The Tempest* III.ii.26–31 (Arden ed., 1988).
7. See Thomas Nashe, *The Terrors of the Night* (1593): “The Monster is essentially dangerous because it is allied to the evil powers.”
8. *The Tempest*, I.ii.333–34.
9. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 104.
10. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 105.

11. *The Tempest*, I.ii.343–44.
12. Anna Maria Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (Milan: B.U.R., 1975), p. 105.
13. Anna Maria Ortese, interview with Dario Bellezza, republished as a postface to *L'Iguana*, p. 192.
14. Ortese, from the 1977 interview, p. 192.
15. Daddo is in love with the Iguana.
16. Anna Maria Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia* (Adelphi, 1987), p. 168.

## CHAPTER 14

### Per Speculum Melancholiae: *The Awakening of Reason Engenders Monsters*

MASSIMO RIVA



Paul Valéry once wrote that there is only one thing more frightening than a monster: trying to describe one. Indeed, writing about monsters can be more frightening than actually seeing one. This is particularly true when, as in modern times, believing in monsters (that is, in traditional representations of monstrosity) has become increasingly difficult, and new ideas about monstrosity are trying to take shape in us.

My original idea for this essay was to show how, in modern literature, the representation of monsters and monstrosity is linked to melancholy and the discourse of melancholy. I intended to show how this connection or “constellation” (as Walter Benjamin would call it) of the monstrous and melancholy reaches its climax in the nineteenth century, when Charles Baudelaire puts the “modern monster” of ennui on the frontispiece of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, identifying it with the mirror image of both the poet and his “other,” the reader. I intended to show how in the Italian tradition as well this constellation reaches its climax, with Giacomo Leopardi and, later, with Gabriele D’Annunzio, in the long ascending and declining trajectory of European Romanticism. Finally, I intended to dwell on the connection between melancholy and the engendering of monsters, focusing in particular on the sexual ambivalence of the monstrous in the work of D’Annunzio.

Yet in writing this essay, what I had initially conceived of as introductory remarks took on a life of their own and became so extensive that I eventually had to give in to the idea that this long introduction to my topic was, after

all, my topic: some reflections on the discourse of monstrosity, focusing not on melancholy as a modern symptom but instead on its genetic culture in modern thought. Taking a step back, to the roots of the Enlightenment in its native Italian version, I have ended up focusing on Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, or, more precisely, on three ideas that I find particularly engaging (and rich in consequences) in their genealogical treatment of monsters and monstrosity: the idea of the "civil monster" (*mostro civile*); the idea that the poetic logic of monstrosity is the logic of technological imagination; and the idea that monsters and monstrosity are, paradoxically, the last stronghold of contemporary humanism.

My point of departure is Book 2 of the *New Science* (Poetic Wisdom). In section 2 (Poetic Logic), chapter 2, "Corollaries concerning Poetic Tropes, Monsters, and Metamorphoses," we read: "Poetic monsters and metamorphoses arose from a necessity of this first human nature, its inability to abstract forms or properties from subjects" (p. 131).<sup>1</sup> As Vico explains in another section of his work: "the first men, the children, as it were, of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them" (*New Science*, book 1, sec. 2, *Principles*, pp. 74–75).

We could say that this quote inaugurates, within and beyond the Italian tradition, a peculiarly modern way of thinking about monsters and monstrosity. To Vico the engendering of monsters derives from a lack of the rational power of abstraction; monsters are "poetic creations"—in the Vichian sense—creatures of imagination who, nevertheless, show a logic of their own. This logic is mental (or cognitive) as well as linguistic (or semiotic) and *poetic*; according to Vico, it is the expression of an original "interface" of Nature and culture: "By their logic [the first men, the children of the human race] . . . had to put subjects together in order to put their forms together, or to destroy a subject in order to separate its primary form from the contrary form which had been imposed upon it. Such a putting together of ideas created the poetic monsters" (*New Science*, book 2, sec. 2, pp. 131–32). This production of ideas as "subjects" (*subietti*) instead of "forms" or qualities—in other words, the composition and personification (or, vice versa, the disembodiment and consequent reassembling) of qualities and forms in a "monstrous" subject—is a "poetic" engendering that allows the human mind to conceive the inconceivable. In Vico we find the reassuring (or disquieting) suggestion that all linguistic constructions, genetically conceived, necessarily engender the "monstrous": what characterizes the "production" of monsters is embedded in the spontaneous, *poetic* logic of language.

Understanding the logic of monstrosity is the difficult task Vico assigns himself as part of his project of a new science. Much of his effort has to do with one of the fundamental "discoveries" of his new science: poetic characters. Monsters are, in fact, "poetic characters," imaginative class concepts or universals

to which, as with certain model or ideal portraits, the first men (children, again, of the human race, unable to produce purely logical abstractions) reduced all particular species that resembled them. Now, we can pose the question of whether this definition is also valid for us, as “moderns” (which, in a somewhat Leopardian fashion, I’d define as the “last men, the adults, as it were, of the human race”; I also intentionally, although ironically, maintain here and throughout my essay the gender bias implicit in the Italian language).

From this perspective, Vico’s definition is an authentic archetype of the inner dialectic of the Enlightenment. In it two irreconcilable strains of ideas about the nature of monsters and monstrosity coexist: monsters are *explainable* as native wisdom, according to the *logic* of poetic characters—and therefore we can recognize in them the imaginative power that shaped them and at the same time understand how they are the embodiment of notions and ideas that we, civilized men, express in abstract, rational terms. From this point of view, monsters belong to the history of early or “primitive” minds and society, to the infancy of humanity, and so on. Secondly, monsters are the embodiment of a *different* logic, or of a logic of difference, one that can neither be thoroughly explained nor translated into our “abstract” thinking, because that logic simply doesn’t obey the same rules as our abstract thinking—it is qualitatively different from rational thought. From this point of view, monsters keep on living within us, because no matter how we, as individuals and as a species grown out of infancy, ridicule them or seriously believe we can explain and understand their origins, we remain connected to our own “primitive,” irrational, *poetic* mind and imagination as if by an umbilical cord.

The first of these two cultural attitudes could be roughly described as the enlightened attitude, the second as the romantic one: but what is most important in Vico’s work is the suggestion that the modern mind allows both these attitudes to *coexist*. From many points of view, our contemporary, late modern attitude toward monsters combines both the enlightened and the romantic position—the instinctive repulsion, the compulsive need to explain, and the intellectual fascination we nourish for monsters as creatures of our imagination, embedded as they are in our multi-secular cultural practices and representations. Therefore, our attitude toward monsters as creatures and monstrosity as a category is marked by a fundamental ambivalence. “Human kind doesn’t stop loving monsters and it finds them wherever they are,” says Jurgis Baltrusaitis. The lair of monsters, their not so secret hiding place, is also the closest and most familiar of sites. This and Paul Valéry’s ironic remark, “Le complément nécessaire d’un monstre c’est un cerveau d’enfant,”<sup>2</sup> strike me as remarkably Vichian. In fact, our late modern culture strikes me as remarkably Vichian. Too disenchanted with “abstract reasoning” to completely believe in “logical explanations,” too skeptical to truly believe in monsters, we are sometimes tempted to embrace the humane logic of (inhuman) monstrosity in opposition to the monstrous logic of (human) rationality. And yet, in our oscillation between demonization (or exorcism) and embracing

(or comprehension) of our monsters, we find ourselves still caught between the opposite poles of the ambivalent logic embedded in language. This is perhaps the most important contribution a rereading of Vico can give us today: a genealogical understanding of the constitutive ambivalence of our own contemporary practices and representations. This, I hope, will become evident from the rest of this essay.

We could say that “genealogy” represents for Culture what “genetics” does for Nature. To a genealogical or genetic way of thinking like Vico’s, monsters are paradoxical creatures: universal and unique at the same time, they are a species of their own and yet allow our infant mind to put various species together in an ideal model or “portrait” of *the* species, *our* species. Examples of this cultural bricolage are the representations of the “perfect man” in medieval culture—the recomposition, in one subject, of the allegorical creatures of bestiaries and mythical kingdoms. This monster, the perfect man, is, according to the already quoted Baltrusaitis, “un hybride don’t chaque anomalie incarne une vertu” (a hybrid each of whose anomalies embodies a virtue). We find the same idea in La Fontaine’s preface to his *Fables*:

Quand Prométhée voulut faire l’homme, il prit la qualité dominante de chaque bête; de ces pièces si différentes il composa notre espèce; il fit cet ouvrage qu’on appelle le petit Monde. Ainsi ces fables sont un tableau où chacun de nous se trouve dépeint.

(When Prometheus wanted to make man, he took the predominant quality of each beast; of these pieces so diverse he composed our species; he made this work that we call small world [microcosm]. Thus these fables are a picture in which each of us finds herself portrayed.)

We find the same wisdom embedded in a manifesto of humanism like Pico della Mirandola’s *Oratio de dignitate hominis* (although the demiurgic decision attributed by La Fontaine to a legendary Prometheus is directly attributed by Pico to God the Father):

Nascenti homini omnifaria semina et omnigenae vitae germina indidit Pater; quae quisque excoluerit illa adolescent, et fructuos suos ferent in illo. Si vegetalia, planta fiet. Si sensualia, obrutescet. Si rationalia, caeleste evadet animal. Si intellectualia, angelus erit et Dei filius.

(Upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these he shall cultivate, that will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.)

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Humankind is the only species without an identity of its own. We could easily add, as a gloss, that, conceived as such, man encompasses within himself the multiple seeds of all creatures; he thus has the potential to confuse the order of creation by germinating, giving birth to monsters, imaginary as well as real. This is a uniquely human power. Monsters are a manifestation of both human creativity and the human vocation for transgression.

It is then quite possible to conceive of a positive, constructive moral function for monsters, and this is precisely what Vico invites us to do. Monsters and monstrosity are an essential part of an affirmative, even (following in Giordano Bruno's footsteps) "heroic" humanism. But what is the deeper logic at work in this process? Vico, as we saw, has a very precise answer: "The distinguishing of ideas produced metamorphoses" (*La distinzione delle idee fece la metamorfosi*), he writes in the seventh corollary concerning poetic tropes, monsters, and metamorphoses (*New Science*, p. 132). The differentiation of the "monstrous" in its various cultural manifestations thus rests for him on the common, unifying principle of a cultural metamorphosis. Each culture nurtures its own monsters, since each culture creates and engenders its own fables, myths, legends, or, as Vico puts it, its own "diversiloquia": "that is—as Vico explains—expressions comprising in one general concept various species of men, animals, deeds, or things" (*New Science*, p. 75).

In a Vichian move, we might assume the metamorphic logic of the monstrous as an essential part of the project of modernity: as the basis of a different hermeneutics (or a hermeneutics of difference), in which what Vico called "diversiloquia" can find better status and recognition than in the monologic or binary thinking of logocentrism. This moves in the direction of a "poetic logic" and might help us find our way back to that "secret language" of monstrosity that lives deep within us.<sup>3</sup> Now here lies the paradox: "*La distinzione delle idee fece la metamorfosi*" (The distinguishing of ideas produced metamorphoses) (*New Science*, p. 75). This ambivalent definition (both parts of this sentence in the Italian text could grammatically function as its subject) translates into Vichian terms the Goyan saying that, as a paraphrase of the original I chose as the title of this essay: not the "sueño" (dream), but the *awakening* of reason engenders monsters.

Let's sum up Vico's perspective: a) monsters have a logic, or better *are* a logic of their own; b) their logic is the *poetic* logic of the species ("genere," in Italian); c) monsters therefore embody the genealogy of the (idea of) species (genere) within our historical and cultural tradition, as an intrinsically *ambivalent* or even paradoxical idea. These three corollaries to Vico's own corollaries boil down to this: the hybrid, metamorphic logic of the monstrous reveals the paradoxical process of *distinction* and *abstraction* of differences which is supposed to secure the *identity* of the species (genere), as a universal, naturalistically conceived as well as culturally determined, ideal. It should be quite clear why this notion is also the testing ground of contemporary humanism, however we want to redefine this word.

Assembling the heterogeneous in order to recognize and distinguish the homogeneous is thus to Vico part of our way of asserting our own identity as a species. It is this peculiar assemblage that we have to extract from Vico's critical and theoretical medley of historical, philological, anthropological, and rhetorical methods. A crucial point in Vico's genealogical treatment of monsters and monstrosity is the intersection or the cross-fertilization of a poetic, a historical and a juridical logic: crucial in particular for the assessment of the ambivalently enlightening power of his new science. In modern times the identity of humanity as a species (Vico, again, writes "genere"), increasingly and thoroughly depends on the certainty of the law, to the point that its own definition comes from a legal document, a declaration of rights, the true manifesto of modernity. Vico shows us the background to this logic: that monsters are congenital to the law, a necessity of its own logic; actually we find in the *New Science* the suggestion that the idea of monstrosity itself has juridical roots. It is not by chance that Vico's discourse harkens back on the one hand to the very foundations of civility or civilization as he conceives it, on the other to the fundamental aesthetic code that informs the modern Italian tradition, its persistent classical or "neoclassical" paradigm. Monsters, Vico suggests, have to do with Culture, not with Nature, with human not with natural laws; actually they have to do with the archetypal laws of the "heroic society," the second (recurring) stage of mankind's development, according to Vico. We hit here on the core of the traditional or classical representation of monsters.

Heroes and monsters are inseparable in classical and neoclassical mythology. That's why we have to decipher the civil and juridical wisdom buried in their poetic stories, as prosaic as the world of law might seem in comparison with the world of myth. The fact is that the two worlds of history and myth tend, in Vico's view, to intersect as the historical explanation of myth and the poetic mythology of history mirror each other in his work. A reconnaissance of the monstrous in Vico's work entails therefore a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the "heroic mind." Here my essay could branch out to follow the lead of melancholy as the ambivalent sign of distinction and stigma of the "heroic mind," the Renaissance "mente eroica," mirror of all monsters. Instead, I'll limit myself to outlining one particular aspect of this deconstruction: the Vichian idea of the "civil monster."

The first concept we encounter in the *New Science* following the genetic traces of monstrosity in connection to the "heroic mind" is the idea of "civil beauty." In section 4 of Book 2 of the *New Science*, "Poetic Economy," drawing the genealogy of Venus as a poetic character of civil beauty in heroic society,<sup>4</sup> Vico writes:

The idea of civil beauty must have been engendered in the minds of the theological poets when they saw that the impious creatures who had taken refuge on their lands [gli empi rifuggiti alle lor terre] were men in aspect but brute beasts in their habits. It was

this civil beauty and no other that was cherished by the Spartans, the heroes of Greece, who cast down from Mount Taygetus the ugly and deformed offspring; that is, those borne by noble women but without benefit of solemn nuptials. Such too must have been the “monsters” condemned by the Law of the Twelve Tables to be thrown into the Tiber.

And here’s the end of the quotation with which I began my revisitation of Vico’s writings and which, we can now say, forms the second, essential part of Vico’s thinking about monsters:

In Roman laws, as Antoine Favre observes in his *Iurisprudentiae papinianae scientia*, children born of prostitutes are called monsters because they have the nature of men together with the bestial characteristic of having been born of vagabond or uncertain unions. And it was as being monsters of this sort, we shall find, that children born of noble women without benefit of solemn nuptials were commanded by the law of the Twelve Tables to be thrown into the Tiber (p. 132 of the English translation).

There are thus two fundamental categories of *civil* monsters: *refugees*, by definition (or lack thereof, because of their half-bestial and nomadic or wandering nature), and the *offspring of unwed mothers*. These are the two fundamental, genealogical categories of the monstrous from a historical and *legal* point of view, harkening back to the *civil and aesthetic order* of classical (Greek and Roman) society, the society of the age of heroes. The origin of the idea of monstrosity is therefore to be found in the *juridical* section of the *heroic mind*. Monsters belong essentially to the *civil* order. They are creatures of the human, not the natural law, or, better, they show the way in which the human law takes the form of a natural law. As Vico explains:

For it is not at all likely that the decemvirs, in that parsimony of laws proper to the first commonwealths, would have given any thought to natural monsters, because of whose extreme rarity anything rare in nature is called monstrous, when even in the superfluity of laws, with which we are now afflicted, legislators leave to the discretion of judges those cases that seldom present themselves. Such then must have been the monsters which were first and properly called civil. (It is one of these that Pamphilus had in mind when, under the false suspicion that the maiden Philumena was pregnant, he says: *aliquid monstri alunt*, “something monstrous is a-breeding”—Terence, *Lady of Andros*, 250.) And so they continued to be called in the Roman laws (*New Science*, book 2, sec. 4, pp. 203–4).

Vico supports this juridical explanation in historical-genealogical terms, focusing consistently on the idea of marriage as a fundamentally *eugenic*, natural

practice (along with the prototypically religious practice of burying the dead, and so on). Monsters are the bastard offspring, the repugnant result of a misalliance between a nobleman and a plebeian, a logical oxymoron as he explains, “secum ipsa discors,” “which is as much to say a monster of mixed and twofold nature.” The plebeians, refugees (rifuggiti) because of their wild, uncivilized nature, are seen throughout the *New Science* as the negative force of civilization: they “practiced marriages like those of wild animals” and therefore “none of them had a certain father . . . and with reference to this uncertainty the plebeians were said by the nobles to have intercourse with their mothers and daughters as beasts do” (p. 204). Of course, monstrous children are born of monstrous unions.

Monstrosity is thus explained as an infraction of the laws of Nature, culturally defined as the *eugenic* code of the species (embodied in the institution of marriage and the family). From this point of view, monsters are a necessary corollary to the ideal portrait of the species (genere). In genetic and genealogical terms, the aesthetic and the juridical codes tend to coincide as do the ideas of “civil beauty” and “civil laws.”

Also in aesthetic terms “monstrosity” is, as I mentioned, the offspring of the “heroic mind,” because to heroes monsters are necessary foes, part of their own identity. Here’s a classical definition of this aesthetic code as we find it in the same section of the *New Science*: “the natural beauty which is apprehended by the human senses” is perceivable

only by those men of perception and comprehension who know how to discern the parts and grasp their harmony in the body as a whole, in which beauty essentially consists. This is why peasants and men of the squalid plebes understand little or nothing of beauty. . . . Hence it must have been the civil beauty that was possessed by Apollo, Bacchus, Ganymede, Bellerophon, Theseus, and other heroes, and perhaps on their account Venus was imagined as male [androgynous].<sup>5</sup> (p. 203)

Rather symptomatic is Vico’s mention, in this context, of the myth of an androgynous Venus (Vico is probably referring here to the Mediterranean cult of a bearded Aphrodite, called Aphroditos, or, more likely, to the early Italian cult of the bald Aphrodite). If Venus is the poetic character meant to embellish the “civil order,” it introduces a curious tension within the frame of the “heroic mind.” This “venereal” presence clearly affects and intimately marks the “ideal portrait of the species” drawn by the “heroic mind.” If the code of “civil beauty” consists in the capacity “to discern the parts and see the harmony of the whole,” hermaphroditic Venus shows the contradiction and gender ambivalence underlining (or overshadowing) the logic of “civil beauty” in Vico’s discourse: s/he/it represents a puzzling harmonic whole. To start with, Aphrodite is already a part of the whole that she (as an androgynous

"subietto") personifies (herm-aphrodite). The idea of an androgynous Venus thus "overflows" its own concept (the embodiment of the aesthetic perfection of the species) out of an *excess* of gender determination (the Platonic ideal behind this image is thus shown to be a "transcendental" excess).

Things become even more interesting, since to Vico the androgynous Venus is historically just a composition, the contamination of two Venuses: the plebeian, vulgar, naked Venus and the noble, veiled, Venus "pronuba," the embodiment of the sublime logic of "heroic classicism," another example of the intrinsic eugenic bias of his ideal portrait of the species. Yet this ideal portrait is intrinsically also a "monstrous" one. If the androgynous is the aesthetic ideal of Neoplatonism, the sublime projection of "high," classical culture, its hermaphroditic embodiment is the baroque monster, the rarity, the freak that accompanies it as its shadow, often confined in the fascinating and frightening jumble or bazaar of popular or medical culture (precisely as the melancholic is considered at the same time a genius and a freak). As an ideal portrait of beauty, the image of an androgynous Venus is, to say the least, ambivalent: it has a meaning only within an aesthetic, that is, hero(t)ic paradigm that obeys the logic of a male, patriarchal order and treats woman as a monster precisely because she is the embodiment of beauty. Medusa is, of course, already in Vico's mythological canon, the mirror image immediately evoked within this paradoxical frame of mind that will bloom in late Romantic poetry.

Throughout the humanist tradition, as in Vico, this aesthetic, hero(t)ic monster remains at the same time a sign (or symptom) of chaos and of a superior order, the two opposite poles toward which the distinction of the species, as a species, is attracted. Chaos, in Vico's *Poetic Physics*—that is, the physics of the theological poets—is defined "as confusion of human seeds in the state of the infamous promiscuity of women," when there were "no institutions of humanity," an obscure time "because it lacked the civil light in virtue of which the heroes were called *incliti*, illustrious" (p. 260).

Vico's inscription of the idea of the "monstrous" within the ambivalent paradigm of modern aesthetic and juridical thought, his identification of the original "civil monsters," helps us unmask the historically genetic constellation of "race, class, and gender" biases that inform the cultural and aesthetic code of "civil beauty" and "natural" law. It is rather ironic that Vico, the anti-modern, the anti-classicist, reread in a late modern context, can help us explain, from a humanistic point of view, the logic of monstrosity as the logic of prejudice embedded in what he calls "heroic culture"—what we might describe as the cultural formation of aristocratic society and modern neoclassicism. The scattered debris of these cultural constructions, of course, resurfaces in our own contemporary, consumption-oriented, and media-orchestrated "pop heroic culture," where the cult of heroes (and, needless to say, the imagination of monsters) still occupies a paramount position.

We are faced here with what I believe is the core of Vico's (and our) critical

ambivalence. When confronted with contemporary “monstrous” metamorphoses of classical, neoclassical, or nonclassical culture, we have two instincts. On the one hand, we recognize the necessity of dismantling the very notion of monstrosity to its historical and cultural roots; on the other, we would like to rescue or redeem the language (and the imagery) of the monstrous as the language (or imagery) of the “other,” buried in us. This redemption of monsters might well be the last bastion of humanistic culture. In Vico’s genetic system and mythological canon, monsters are, as I said, the embodiment of the cultural logic and the historical self-creation and self-education of the human species (genre). Hercules and Orpheus, the destroyer and the tamer of monsters, are the two most important icons, the heroic and poetic (male) archetypes of this physical and spiritual self-creation. Vico sees both of them (and the other heroic figures or poetic characters that, in the “mental dictionary” of humanity, can be related to their typology) as the expression of a fundamentally genetic struggle: the enslaving or domestication of the Earth, of wild Nature.

This sequence of Vico’s thought is well known. Actually, this is certainly the best known of the poetic and mythological genealogies of the *New Science*, according to which both Hercules and Orpheus are interpreted (in accordance with Vico’s fantastic etymology of the word “interpretari,” as “inter-patrari”—entering the minds of the “patres”) as the myths of the fathers, the founders of humanity, the poetic descriptions of the making of “civil order.” As such, though, they also show the genetic ambivalence of our attitudes toward Nature. Nature, he writes, is represented in ancient mythology as “a great dragon, covered with scales and spines (the thorns and briars), bearing wings (for the lands belonged to the heroes), always awake and vigilant (thickly grown in every direction).” Here, in the deciphering of monsters as poetic images engendered in the process of conquering and mastering Nature we have another example of Vico’s peculiarly ambivalent prophecy. He gives us another clue to a critical understanding of the logic of monstrosity as it develops in modern times because, according to his interpretation, what is really at work in the imagination of monsters is no less than the early, “primitive” projection of a technological mind—the *poetic* language of technology, if you wish.

Let’s follow Vico in his apparently tortuous and meandering, yet quite linear, reasoning, where philological imagination and poetic logic interact with or intersect each other (and I suggest that you think, as I happened to while reading this passage, of Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings in which allegory and technological imagination intertwine).

This dragon they [the early giants of humanity] made the guardian of the golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides. Because of the wetness from the waters of the flood, the dragon was later believed to have been born in the water. Under another aspect they imagined [the earth as] a hydra [also from *hydōr*, water], which, when any of its heads were cut off, always grew others in their place. It was of

three alternating colors: black (the burned-over land), green (the leaf), and gold (the ripe grain). These are the three colors of the serpent's skin, which, when it grows old, is sloughed off for a fresh one. Finally, under the aspect of its fierceness in resisting cultivation, the earth was also imagined as a most powerful beast, the Nemean lion (whence later the name lion was given to the most powerful of the animals), which philologists hold to have been a monstrous serpent. All these beasts vomit forth fire, which is the fire set to the forest by Hercules. (pp. 188–89)

Here's the ambivalence I see in this historical and mythological medley. The humanistic, anthropomorphic logic that, according to Vico, informs this process is also the description of a dehumanizing process, at the expense of one particular "subietto" (Nature, Earth, the serpent, the mother of all monsters, the ultimate subject or "ab-ject" of the hybrid logic of creation or production of monsters), the "hyle"—the primal matter of metamorphosis as some of his hermetic, seventeenth-century sources could suggest to Vico. The demonization of Nature is an essential part of progressive, anthropomorphic humanism, with its ambivalent bent toward a black or a white magic. Here lie also the roots of the Faustian myth. (And here one could open another chapter of Vichian criticism, the chapter that relates to the privileged position of the Judeo-Christian mythology within the mental dictionary of humanity; perhaps also with the suggestion that Genesis is the actual imprint of this mental dictionary and therefore refers to the status of monsters within the Judeo-Christian, as opposed to the classical, tradition. Unfortunately, there's no space to do that here).

We could, instead, follow Vico further in his reconnaissance of this primordial or primeval territory, along the itinerary of an anthropological and ethnological exploration and systematization that, beyond the obvious limits and inaccuracies of his knowledge, distinctly echoes modern inventories and potentially embraces, with some symptomatic exclusions, the entire "mental dictionary" of humanity.

In another part of Greece another story grew up, telling of the child Hercules slaying the serpents while yet in his cradle; that is, in the infancy of the heroic age. In yet another, Bellerophon slays the monster called Chimaera, having the tail of a serpent, the body of a goat (to signify the enforested earth), and the head of a lion belching flames. In Thebes it is Cadmus who slays the great dragon and sows his teeth. (By a fine metaphor they gave the name of serpent's teeth to the curved pieces of hard wood they must have employed to plough the earth before the use of iron was discovered). Cadmus himself becomes a serpent . . . as we shall explain more fully later, when we shall see that the serpents of Medusa's head and Mercury's staff signified the dominion of the lands. (p. 189)

And so on, and so forth, beyond the boundaries of the Greek commonwealths, within new horizons opened to Vico, although indirectly, by the discovery of the New World: "Thus, in illustration of the Mental Dictionary (and it is a matter worthy of reflection), the kings of the American Indians, as Fracastoro sings in his *Syphilis*, were found to carry a dried snakeskin in place of a scepter. The Chinese too charge their royal arms with a dragon and bear a dragon as the emblem of the civil power" (pp. 191–92).

Thus Vico comprehensively reinterprets monsters as the repository of a fundamentally social, historical, political, anthropological, and technological dynamic whose projective logic is a poetic, that is, "rhetorical" and "textual," logic. I would argue that, as remote as our cultural perspectives might be from those of Vico, this critical medley and its underlying logic are still very much part of our late modern cultural practices: of that medley of historical, anthropological, ethnographical, psychological data and interpretations, intermingled with micro-textual and macro-cultural exegeses, which we call "cultural studies" and whose principal object or target is our literary tradition.

An intrinsic part of this "cultural studies" approach is the critique of those "abstract meanings" that have become an integral part of our own cultural and linguistic heritage to the point of blinding us to the inner dynamics of its metaphoric logic or "wisdom." Yet our enlightened deciphering of the meanings of myths, within the context of a given culture, can sometimes be at odds with our pretense of understanding them by extracting their universal, humanistic "wisdom."<sup>6</sup> It is to the logic of "monstrosity" as a peculiarly human and humanistic (or post-humanistic) category that we have to return, in order to reach our conclusions.

There are two poetic or mythological archetypes that, according to Vico, best embody the thought process of "monstrosity" as such: Pan and Proteus, both derived from Orcus, the ultimate monster, Chaos itself. The imagination of "shapelessness," of chaos, coincides for Vico with the imagination and invention of a cosmos. Shapelessness was the very attribute of humanity that Pico della Mirandola gave (on behalf of God the Father) to man, man conceived as a "petit monde," the microcosm of Renaissance and hermetic thought. This is the core of that differentiation that "produces metamorphoses." This is also the core of the ambivalence of Vico's (and our) thought.

The logic of monstrosity, as interpreted within the parameters of Vico's *New Science*, is a logic of *self-birthing*. It shows "how the founders of gentile humanity in a certain sense generated and produced in themselves the proper human form in its two aspects: that is, how by means of frightful religions and terrible paternal powers and sacred ablutions they brought forth from their giant bodies the form of our just corporature, and how by discipline of their household economy they brought forth from their bestial minds the form of our human mind" (p. 262). In Vico's system, these human shapes are, in historical terms, universally determined by the transition from a "promiscuous," matriarchal,



nomadic, and monstrous chaos to a patriarchal order, rooted on the cultivated land, where the world of nations finally takes shape. The genealogy of the "civil order" as a patriarchal and national order is thus secured through the imposition and transmission of the law of the Father, which is in turn secured by the certainty of the offspring, the cult of the dead and the ancestors as well as by the protection of territorial boundaries: respectively the discerning parts (the subjects) and the harmonic whole of the (modern) state. These founding pillars of civilization are intimately connected to the civil and aesthetic logic of the "monstrous." Monsters are also the traditional guards of confines and boundaries of all sorts. Heroes, on the contrary, are the explorers of this and the nether (or even the outer) worlds.

If there is a seminal mythological and literary figure in Western imagination that sums all of this up, it is of course Ulysses, the founding archetype of this ambivalent paradigm. Reread in Vichian terms—that is, in anthropological or anthropo-genetic terms—the story of Ulysses, the ultimate hero fighting monsters of all sorts, continuously trespassing on the various territories they guard or protect, is also the story of the ultimate refugee (*rifuggito*), or, better, the paradoxical conversion of the refugee, the stranger, the nomad, the "impious" one, into the wandering hero, the exiled king and pious husband who must return to his homeland in order to reassert the law, the property, and religion of the father, the stock, the family, the race. (With or without the atrocities that mark Ulysses' revenge, this paradigm can be followed throughout the Western canon: from Dante, the refugee as Christian pilgrim, to Joyce, the modern refugee par excellence, the refugee at home.) But let's go back to Vico's description of chaos, in an attempt to wrap up this line of reasoning.

It is not by chance nor simple concession to the intellectual fashion of the day, I believe, that in a recent example of "pop monster culture," Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (an attempt to frame within contemporary parameters the eternal plot of heroes and children facing Nature's dragons) included an ambivalent reference to chaos theory—chaos theory as the ultimate resort of, or antidote to, technological imagination. The early physicists, the theological poets, Vico writes,

imagined [chaos] as Orcus, a misshapen monster which devoured all things because men in this infamous promiscuity did not have the proper form of men, and were swallowed up by the void because through the uncertainty of offspring they left nothing of themselves. This [chaos] was later taken by the physicists as the prime matter of natural things, which, formless itself, is greedy for form and devours all forms. The poets, however, gave it also the monstrous form of Pan, the wild god who is the divinity of all satyrs inhabiting not the cities but the forests; a character to which they reduced the impious vagabonds wandering through the great forest of the earth and having the appearance of men but the

habits of abominable beasts. Afterward, by forced allegories, the philosophers, misled by the name Pan, everything, took him as a symbol for the formed universe. (p. 260)

Again, what is worth noting here is how an anthropo-genetic myth (the fundamental myth of the *New Science*) becomes the basis for a hermeneutical description of the fundamental ambivalence of human culture, including its progressive rationalization (or secularization) of myth into allegory and abstract thinking.<sup>7</sup> (It is not a coincidence that the genealogy of Pan could lead us to the cultural genealogy of a paradoxical double genre: tragedy and satire. In their dialectics the logic of monstrosity is displayed as the ambivalently sublime and degenerate paradigm of modernity, where tragedy must necessarily give way to satire). Besides Pan, Proteus is the second, the other half-creature, of this ambivalent paradigm of the engendering of monsters.

Scholars have also held that the poets meant first matter in the fable of Proteus, with whom Ulysses wrestles in Egypt, Proteus in the water and the hero out of it, unable to get a grip on the monster, who keeps assuming new forms. But the scholars thus made sublime learning out of what was doltishness and simplicity on the part of the first men, who (just as children, looking in a mirror, will try to seize their own reflections) thought from the various modifications of their own shapes and gestures that there must be a man in the water, forever changing into different shapes. (pp. 260–61)

Again, what is remarkable here is not so much the fact that Vico interprets the myth (of Proteus) according to the model of a “savage” or “infant” thought, betraying the same condescending attitude that he denounces as “boria dei dotti,” but the fact that his interpretation hints (through the forced “allegory” of the mirror) at a hermeneutic paradox: the hermeneutic paradox of modern humanism. What Proteus represents, in his monstrosity, is the irreconcilable otherness of our own identity, an ideal portrait of the species (genere) as an infinite realization of the metamorphic principle.

Vico thus perfectly captures the essential ambivalence of modern thought. The logic of monstrosity is the logic of the species, that is the engendering of the very idea of the species (genere) as the cornerstone of a binary system of thought that necessarily, by recognizing differences in Nature, at the same time asserts and denies the unifying principle of metamorphosis that informs it. Body and soul, being and becoming, distinction and identity: even today, at the end of a century of transgressions and monstrosities (and perhaps at the dawn of a new era of tampering with “natural laws,” from cloning to stem cell recycling, the manipulation of many species for the benefit of one—OURS—), we are systematically dismantling the hierarchical and gender-biased logic of identity and otherness that informs our thinking and consequently affects both

our "civil" and aesthetic codes; even today we are caught in the vicious circle of "naming" the un-nameable, the metamorphic principle itself. The logical monstrosity (the monstrosity of logic) is metamorphosis, because we cannot name it without "differentiating" it, giving it a form.

Pan and Proteus are the two paradigmatic figures of the final confrontation between a declining modernism and its own self-portrait. Pan and Proteus are, after all, very familiar, classical gods-monsters, monsters who, within the classical paradigm, have lost their frightening, alien powers, which instead survive in their contemporary cultural transformations or metamorphoses. Think, for example, of the persistent multiforms of the demonic, in the case of Pan, or of the ambiguous fascination with our technological power over forms and shapes, in the case of Proteus. (I submit two "pop culture" examples: the evil cyborg shape-shifter in *Terminator 2* and the good shape-shifter or guardian changeling in *Star Trek Deep Space Nine*. Shape-shifters as "Founders": Is contemporary science fiction the ultimate version of our search for an "ideal portrait of the species"?)

I had originally planned an inventory of the Vichian subtext of D'Annunzio's metamorphic figures in the *Laudi* (D'Annunzio as the bard of metamorphosis, of a poetic reevaluation of the mythical, androgynous power of the monstrous). Instead I ended up in outer space making easy, perhaps too easy references to contemporary "pop culture." Yet I believe there are some serious connections to be considered here. In a Vichian sense, we might assume the metamorphic logic of the "monstrous" as the basis of a different hermeneutics (or a hermeneutics of difference). And yet the uneasiness that, notwithstanding their familiarity, monsters of all sorts still provoke in us is due to the profound contradiction they embody. The reason is simple. Monsters are a uniquely human affair; they belong to the very core of our rational/irrational self-conception and self-formation as a species. In their twisted and fascinating logic, the anthropomorphic mixes with its opposite, the process of dehumanization. Both are the inseparable ingredients of metamorphosis.

The monster, writes Jean Burgos, makes us face the "other," and this "other" is, of course, our own self, our own species. The contradiction is a logical one and lies in the following, as Jean Burgos puts it: "Otherness does not reinforce its own singularity, does not increase the value of its uniqueness; on the contrary, it de-values and de-naturalizes this singularity, this uniqueness by questioning the very concept of an immovable and irreplaceable nature."<sup>8</sup> I see this contradiction already at work in Vico's early modern mind, perhaps the very thing he is trying to exorcise. This contradiction is still with us, within us. We can place ourselves in a position of radical criticism of the humanistic tradition, from the point of view of that which it condemns as "monsters" and "monstrosity." Or we can try to rescue the emancipating power of Vico's thought by following his intrinsically paradoxical thinking to its extreme and logical, that is, *poetic* conclusion. Perhaps it is possible to redeem his humanistic concept of the "monstrous" as the "ideal portrait of the species" from its early modern

racial and gender bias and prejudice, thus redrawing that portrait to include what is excluded, repressed, overshadowed.

As Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his "Letter to a Young Poet": "All the dragons of our life are perhaps a princess who awaits to see us as beautiful and courageous. All terrifying things are perhaps just helpless things, waiting for us to come to their aid." The princess/dragon is perhaps just the other face of our own desire for metamorphosis, precisely as Medusa the gorgon (a favorite icon of "decadent" symbolism) is just the other side of beauty: that which petrifies, freezes all metamorphosis, unless we reflect on her frightening, serpentine aspect. And yet the princess/dragon (remember the Iguana of Anna Maria Ortese's novel by the same title?) is also an image of abjection, of the abjection we project on all things living, by our constitutive ambivalence toward them, in the name of our protean nature.

All things considered, there is another alternative. We can dispose of the eugenic concept of an "ideal portrait of the species" as fundamentally biased and tainted, including the cavalier idea of having the power or the right to "redeem" and "rescue" (let alone to kill *ad libitum*) princesses and dragons. Does this also mean that we need to dispose of our humanistic ideals, of humanism itself as a tainted idea? The real point, the point that remains compelling today in our "civil" order, seems to me this: how to save our perennial civil monsters, the refugees, the unwed mothers, the unwanted or famished children, all those who, to our eyes, embody a difference, from the fascinating logic of monstrosity that still threatens them (us). Monstrosity is also what we *don't* want to see.

Vico's legacy appears to have split in two fundamental directions, in modern times and within the Italian poetic tradition. If there's one author who best embodies the constitutive ambivalence of the "heroic mind" in its modernist metamorphoses, echoing what Baudelaire in an unforgettable poem defined as the most infamous and foul of all monsters, the "delicate" monster of ennui, that author is certainly Gabriele D'Annunzio. Yet it is to Giacomo Leopardi that we have to return if we want to capture instead the other side of Vico's legacy, the radical self-criticism inherent in the humanistic tradition—a self-criticism that can help us counterbalance the aggressive, triumphant vitalism of an unleashed "metamorphic" principle, even at the price of losing sight of the potentially liberating power of "metamorphosis." Thus I would like to conclude with a quote from Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, his philosophical journal. In this entry (for July 28, 1823), Leopardi admonishes us, modern readers; we should read his words as a true "monitus," harkening back to the Latin etymology of the word "monster." In his somber words we are reminded of the other side of the "heroic," protean, liberating power of monstrosity. *Per speculum melancholiae*:

Imperfect persons, defective ones, monstrous in their bodies,  
among those that never make it to birth and are lost in abortions  
not voluntarily procured, spoiled, etc.; among those that are such  
since birth and die as soon as they are born or soon after, because

of natural, internal or external vices; those born as such are seen and can be easily counted, carrying all sorts of monstrosities and defects; finally, those that became so after birth, sooner or later, naturally and without immediate external reason, I mean either because of a congenital vice later developed or because a natural illness supervened; summing up, I mean, and gathering all these individuals together, one will see at a glance and without reflecting much that their number in the human species alone, or rather only in the civil part of it, greatly outnumbers not only what we find in any species of domesticated animals, which nevertheless are corrupted and mutated from their natural living conditions, as they are in a thousand ways exploited and beaten by us; it outnumbers altogether the number of defective and monstrous individuals that we see in all species of animals, altogether considered. This truth is so evident that nobody, I believe, thinking about it for just a moment and gathering his recollections, could deny it. A similar difference one will find between civil and savage nations, and proportionally between the more and the less civilized, according to an exact scale, as among French, Italians, Germans, Spanish etc.<sup>9</sup>

Is Leopardi suggesting that, more than any definition of the “monstrous” as inherently belonging to *OUR* species, what needs to be addressed is first of all this evidence, the difference in its occurrence, in proportion, among so-called civilized and uncivilized or “developed” and “underdeveloped” nations? Almost two centuries later, on the path of modernity, we can easily refer his melancholy words to our own perceptions and misperceptions. Both the “natural” and the “civil” monster cry out to our enlightened mind.

## Notes

1. Quotations from *The New Science* are taken from Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (3d. ed. [1774]; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968).
2. I take both quotations from Jean Burgos, “Le Monstre, même et autre,” in *Presence du Monstre—Mythe et Réalité* (Paris, 1975), pp. 14–15.
3. Burgos, “Le monstre,” p. 15.
4. “whence *honestas* [which Vico etymologically couples with *venustas*] had the meanings of nobility, beauty and virtue.”
5. This formulation is somewhat consistent with the definition of the “monstrous” that we find in Kant’s *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, section 1, Book 2, A 26, where Kant relates the idea to a disproportion between the dimensions of an object and its internal goal, and therefore denies that we can find the “monstrous” in Nature: “an object is ‘monstrous’ (*Ungebeuer*) when with its size it annuls the end that is implicit in its own concept,” that is, when it overflows its own ideal proportions. This

"overflowing" is clearly linked, in modern aesthetics, to the logic of the "sublime." But what is a universal perception for Kant is marked for Vico by a difference that is qualitative and historically constitutive rather than quantitative and formal.

6. The fundamental ambivalence I see embedded within this point of view consists in, on the one hand, recognizing and appreciating the original, poetic eloquence of myths, legends, and other products of so-called popular culture, while on the other critically reviewing the cultural codes or canons that inform them.
7. What is a mark of absolute ignorance becomes the poetic wisdom of an intellectual development. Yet in his attempt to save the imaginative difference of Pan as a product of a *poetic* logic, Vico himself applies a "forced allegory" in order to "explain" its true "meaning," although his "allegory" (as the discourse of the "other," or of otherness as such) is not based on an abstract, moral, or theoretical system but rather on a concrete interpretation of myth, understood in the Vichian sense as *vera narratio*.
8. Burgos, "Le Monstre . . .," in *Presence du Monstre—Mythe et Réalité* (Paris, 1975), p. 15.
9. "Persone imperfette, difettose, mostruose di corpo, tra quelle che non arrivano a nascere e si perdono per aborti, sconcature ec. non volontarie né procurate, tra quelle che son tali dalla nascita, e muoiono appena nate o poco appresso, per vizi naturali interni o esterni; quelle che così nate vivono e si veggono e si ponno facilmente contare, annoverando le mostruosità e difettosità d'ogni sorta; quelle finalmente che tali son divenute dopo la nascita, più presto o più tardi, naturalmente e senza esterna cagione immediata, voglio dire o per vizio ingenerato sviluppatosi in seguito, o per malattia qualunque naturalmente sopravvenuta; sommando dico, e raccogliendo tutti questi individui insieme, si vedrà a colpo d'occhio e senza molta riflessione che il loro numero nel solo genere umano, anzi nella sola parte civile di esso, avanza di gran lunga non solamente quello che trovasi in qualsivoglia altro intero genere di animali, non solamente eziandio quello che veggiamo in ciascheduna specie degli animali domestici, che pur sono corrotti e mutati dalla naturale condizione e vita, e da noi in mille guise travagliati e malmenati; ma tutto insieme il numero degli individui difettosi e mostruosi che noi veggiamo in tutte le specie d'animali che ci si offrono giornalmente alla vista, prese e considerate insieme. La qual verità è così manifesta, che niuno, io credo, purché vi pensi un solo momento e raccolga le sue reminiscenze, la potrà contrastare. Simile differenza si troverà in questo particolare fra le nazioni civili e selvagge, e proporzionatamente fra le più civili e le meno, secondo un'esatta scala, come tra' francesi italiani tedeschi, spagnuoli ec. Quali conseguenze si tirino da queste osservazioni, è così facile il vederlo, come esse conseguenze sono evidentissime, ed hanno quella maggiore certezza che possa avere una proposizione dimostrata matematicamente e dedotta matematicamente da un'altra di cui non si possa dubitare" (*Zibaldone*, p. 3058–60, July 28, 1823). The translation is mine.

## CHAPTER 15

### *Monstrous Knowledge*

BARBARA SPACKMAN



For feminists on the threshold of the twenty-first century, the scariest monster of all time goes not by the name of Cyclops or Cerberus, Dracula or Godzilla, but rather lurks, within and without the halls of academe, in the guise of the neuter universal subject of knowledge. It is the merit of the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero to have conceptualized the monstrosity of this subject from within what she and the Diotima group have called the “thought of sexual difference.”<sup>1</sup> *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* takes as its task the thinking of sexual difference, not according to the all-too-familiar logic of absolute difference—the logic according to which “woman” is the negative of a positive, the other of the same, a secondary “sexuation” of an originally neuter “man”—but rather according to what Cavarero calls an “absolute dual” that would understand the sex-specific embodiment of human beings as originary.<sup>2</sup> From that perspective, the supposedly neutral and neuter universal subject is produced though the elevation to the status of universal of a particular, sexed subject: a male subject whose “sexuation” is at once included and occulted by that elevation. At once particular and universal, neuter and male, the subject of language and of philosophy is, conceptually, fully as monstrous from the point of view of the “absolute dual” as are those other products of the logic of absolute difference: hermaphrodites, Medusas, the “monstrous feminine,” all those figures that trace their genesis to Aristotle’s understanding of monstrosity as, in its beginnings, a deviation from a male norm.<sup>3</sup>

Cavarero focuses on the consequences of this monstrosity for the now untenable notion that language itself is neutral, but the implications for structures of knowledge are clear; the ways we know, and the ways we position ourselves as knowers are not neutral but bear the traces of those who constructed them.

Elizabeth Grosz has referred to this genderedness as “the male sexualization of knowledge,” the projection of male sexualized bodies onto the structure of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> As with the monstrosity of the subject of language in Cavarero’s analysis, the male sexualization of the subject of knowledge brings with it a disavowal of its sexualization (or in Cavarero’s terms “sexuation,” a term that oscillates in meaning between “sex-specific embodiment” and “gendering”) so that it presents itself as neuter, neutral, disembodied. And the principal way in which it will appear to be disembodied is precisely by attributing that sexed body essentially to someone else, a someone else marked both as female and as monstrous. Female monsters are, from this point of view, the product of the disavowal of the male sexualization of knowledge and of the subject, and allegorical figures for the monstrosity of the subject.<sup>5</sup>

“It will appear to be disembodied”: the language I use in exposing the genderedness of these structures bears and reinstates that very genderedness. In order to “reveal” this monstrosity I have invoked a particular model of understanding that itself provides us with an example of the way in which epistemology and gender are inextricable: the hermeneutic model that posits truth as hidden, as covered over in some way and therefore in need of being revealed. This is already a richly figural description, of course, for the notion that truth is hidden and can be revealed implies the necessity of a “revelatio,” etymologically a drawing back of the veils. And insofar as the truth is a hidden one, we can also say that this is a depth model; truth is understood precisely as that which does not lie on the surface—that’s “superficial”—but rather lies behind or beneath something else.<sup>6</sup>

This familiar model, that posits an appearance that hides an essence (artifice hides truth, rhetoric hides plain speech, cosmetics hide the reality of old age, and so on) and whose traces are everywhere in the language of “appearance” and “reality,” takes as privileged figure a topos whose genderedness is unquestionable. She is Frau Welt, the enchantress-turned-hag, that familiar topos in which it will be revealed that a seemingly beautiful, alluring young woman is a shrunken, usually toothless, and usually diseased old woman. The veils are drawn back, and we discover that youth and beauty were the effect of artifice (or magic, or rhetoric), and the toothless crone is truth and reality. The Italian literary tradition is particularly rich in examples of the topos, from Dante’s “femmina balba” and the unforgettable laundress of Machiavelli’s letter to Luigi Guicciardini, to Ariosto’s Alcina, Tasso’s Armida, and D’Annunzio’s fin de siècle versions in *Il piacere*, among others.<sup>7</sup> What is of interest here is that the kind of reading that produces the “truth” of these figures (i.e., the “truth” that these are figures for truth) is itself dependent upon the hermeneutic model. It discards appearance and the literal in order to get to a “hidden,” figural meaning. It “seems” that we are talking about enchantresses and hags but “in reality” we’re talking about truth and artifice. In so doing, the literal embodiment of the metaphor is discarded in order to get to the truth of the tenor, which in turn is understood as untainted, in essence, by its vehicle. Discarded



as well, by such a reading, would be any essential relation between the gender of the vehicle and the supposed neutrality of the "truth" of the tenor. If this is the case, we would perhaps want to read differently, and insist upon the embodiment of the metaphor—how it is bodied forth—and thereby ask what ideological work is accomplished through this bodying forth. We would want, in other words and following Nietzsche, to stop at the appearance and insist that this particular embodiment and consequent gendering is "as essential" as what it presumably hides. And we would then produce a different "truth": the hermeneutic model embodied in the figure of the enchantress-turned-hag gives us a structure of knowledge that positions the knower as male, and what is unknown or to be known as female. It sets up this relation as a heterosexual seduction; it positions mind as male and bodies as female; indeed, it sets up female bodies as "transformable" (the enchantress is transformed into a hag).

This is predictable enough, given the structure of disavowal that underlies the monstrosity of the subject. The effacement of an originary "sexuation," after all, produces monsters, in this case a female monstrous object of knowledge, whose condition is the result of the displacement of the gendering and embodiment of the knower himself. Predictable, but nonetheless troubling in its implications, for not only does it expose the gendering of epistemological structures, it also poses a challenge to feminist thinkers whose aim is to create structures that will allow women to be not only objects but also subjects of knowledge. If epistemological and disciplinary structures are themselves gendered, it is not enough merely to do the gentlemanly thing and allow women access to them. As Grosz puts it, "where feminism remains committed to the project of knowing women, of making women objects of knowledge, without in turn submitting the position of knower, of subject of knowledge to a reorganization, it remains as problematic as the knowledge it attempts to supplant or replace."<sup>8</sup> It is not enough to "make room" for women as objects of knowledge, as did gynocriticism or certain forms of so-called herstory; new discursive spaces, and a "structural reorganization of positions of knowing," as Grosz puts it, are required.

The use of a spatial metaphor to name such a reorganization of epistemological structures is not unique to Grosz. It may be found in feminist critics as diverse as Elaine Showalter, Teresa de Lauretis, Joan Kelly, Luce Irigaray, and Adriana Cavarero.<sup>9</sup> From Showalter's early invocation of a "wild zone" to De Lauretis's "space-off," the notion of an "elsewhere" as the "place" from which feminist knowledge might be produced has been a constant in feminist theory. That space is not conceived of as some absolute outside, some pure utopian space beyond "patriarchal" structures, but rather as an internally divided and contradictory space that is at once inside and outside of ideology, inside and outside of the symbolic order and the epistemological structures and disciplinary practices embedded in it. Such "spaces" may be found in the practices of thinkers like Irigaray and Cavarero, who replay or mime the discourses of Western philosophy in order to occupy them differently, to produce what remains unthought in them, to read them "in spite of" themselves.<sup>10</sup> They

may be found, in varying degrees of sophistication, in Joan Kelly's notion of the feminist historian's "double vision," or in the feminist appropriations of the divided "spacing" of the Derridean "signature" by Peggy Kamuf or by Elizabeth Grosz herself. They may also be found in the rewriting of cultural narratives and myths by fiction writers and filmmakers. I would like here to look at one such rewriting that would seem to address some of the difficulties posed by the gendering of epistemological structures and the monstrosity of the subject of knowledge: Maria Corti's revisiting of the mythical sirens in her 1989 novel *Il canto delle sirene*. Though Corti herself (one of this century's most prominent Italian literary critics and semioticians as well as a creative writer) could hardly be grouped among the feminist theorists I have just mentioned, her novel creates a space in which the question of the relation between gender and epistemology, and the status of the embodiment of metaphor, are dramatized through a fiction that takes as its protagonists the sirens and their transformations.

*Il canto delle sirene* interests me here not so much as a novel as an encyclopedic text that recounts the appearance and transformations of the mythical sirens from the time of Ulysses to that of a twentieth-century female protagonist whose professional situation cannot but recall that of Corti herself. Interspersed between the tales of a fourteenth-century artist who is led to his ruin by the sirens, a Nordic fisherman who houses a siren landlocked by frozen fiords, and the scholar Celestina—torn between academic research and the sirens of creative prose—are conversations among the sirens themselves. The creation of a space within which the sirens speak rather than sing their fatal song, and the inclusion of a female protagonist as their final "victim," might suggest that the novel has as its conscious or unconscious project a rewriting of the relations between gender and epistemology, one that has feminist potential insofar as such rewriting may attempt a reorganization of the structures of knowledge. It is certainly the case that Corti replays a great many, often conflicting versions of the myth, with all the erudition one would expect from such an accomplished scholar. This multiplicity allows her sirens to be at once inside and outside of their own representation. Perched on their rocks, they recount the transformations that take place historically in the representation of the sirens, transformations in representation that in turn produce changes in their monstrous bodies. Corti's narrator and the sirens themselves equivocate as to the "truth" of those representations, with some representations pronounced false, thereby suggesting an essence behind appearance; yet others are presented as productive of the very thing they would "represent." Through this equivocation, the sirens are gradually transformed, not in history but by the narrative, into figures for figuration itself. The novel thus offers fertile ground for an examination of the two modes of embodiment at stake here: both the thematic embodiment represented by the monstrous bodies of the sirens and the question of "embodiment" posed by metaphor.

Indeed, as transformed, monstrous, female bodies, the sirens are sisters of the enchantress-turned-hag; like her, they dramatize the relations between

bodies and knowledge.<sup>11</sup> As Corti tells it, replaying Ovid and other versions that recount the origins of the sirens themselves, the gift of knowledge to the sirens has been represented as compensation for their bodily transformation. As young girls and companions of Persephone, they are said to have witnessed her rape by Pluto. One version of the tale suggests that they begged to be given wings so that they might search for her over the seas; another suggests that Demeter meant to punish them for their inaction. As Corti tells it, the girls were spellbound at the scene, uncomprehending: *"rimasero immobili in una sorta di incanto. Immaturette, inesperte dei drammi degli dei, non fecero niente per Proserpina, donde l'ira di Cerere, potente dea"* (they remained immobile as if under a spell. Immature little girls, inexperienced in the dramas of the gods, they did nothing to save Persephone, hence the ire of Demeter, powerful goddess).<sup>12</sup> The effect of the rape on the young girls anticipates the effect of the sirens on their victims; a siren effect precedes the creation of the sirens themselves, as though they themselves were their very first victims. Enthralled at their origin, they will henceforth enthrall others, and the sign of their approach in Corti's text—a sudden immobility, be it of wind or waves—will henceforth mime their own immobility at the traumatic scene; unknowing at their origin, they will henceforth know all. In fact, this initial traumatic scene, read "in spite of itself," might be understood as the staging of the relation between knowledge and female embodiment that is the corollary of the relation between knowledge and male embodiment the sirens themselves will come to figure. This latter relation is one in which knowledge and embodiment cannot coexist; the siren's seduction is the promise of knowledge at the price of a *"liberarsi del corpo"* (liberation from the body), as Corti puts it. For the tradition of which Corti's sirens are part, knowledge is knowledge only insofar as it is disembodied. Yet the monstrous logic we've outlined, as well as the myth of the sirens, would suggest that this disembodiment is a "male" one, and the "sexuation" that is disavowed appears displaced onto a female body. Hence, I would argue, the coupling of monstrosity and knowledge in the figure of the sirens; the coupling of female bodies and knowledge, which for the Western idealist tradition is equivalent to a contamination of knowledge by "the body," is necessarily monstrous. What the myth of the origins of the sirens presents at first as transformed bodies, then as knowledge offered in compensation, can now be reread as the narrativization of a conceptual knot: "sexuation" plus knowledge equals monstrosity.

All this is suggested by Corti's text, rather than appearing as an interpretation of the narrator. In fact, the text says a good deal more than her narrator or the protagonist of the penultimate chapter, the scholar Celestina—whose name recalls the "celestial sirens" of Platonic tradition—knows.<sup>13</sup> The reader whose hopes are raised by the prospect of a restructuring of the myth of the sirens through the inclusion of a female "knower" finds herself at first disappointed, but later instructed. The problem Corti faces—how to insert a female knower into a metaphorical structure that positions the knower as male—is, as we've seen, a version of the question that feminist scholars in a

number of fields have been grappling with in the past few decades. Can one insert the female knower into the existing structures (whether metaphorical or disciplinary) without fundamentally altering them, or must methods of research and interpretation themselves be altered to accommodate women as subjects of knowledge?<sup>14</sup> Corti's novel poses the question slightly differently: Can the metaphor of the sirens accommodate a woman "victim" and yet leave intact the structure of metaphor? In the end, the answer is no, but along the way the novel puts into play a number of strategies, illustrating their effectiveness and failures.

This is not to say that Corti does not attempt to refigure the metaphor, bend it and tweak it. In the chapter that recounts the story of the landlocked siren, "Dal fondo dello specchio," the novel makes a first attempt at degendering and disembodiment of the metaphor. Marooned in Norway, a siren explains to an innocent fisherman the relation of men to knowledge:

"Ora ti racconterò una storia" disse. E cominciò.

"Quando è stato creato il mondo e i semi di tutte le cose furono generati, venne creato anche il seme della conoscenza, che era fatto per la mente dell'uomo, la quale non è solo la parte detta più nobile, ma quella che distingue gli uomini dagli altri esseri viventi. Però dire che il seme era fatto per la mente dell'uomo è dire una cosa diversa da quando si dice che l'uomo è fatto per la donna e la donna per l'uomo. Nell'incontro fra il seme di conoscenza e la mente umana si produce qualcosa di minaccioso."

Il pescatore si diede una grattatina sui capelli;

"Perché minaccioso?"

"Perché da quell'incontro sono sempre nati pensieri che hanno sconvolto il mondo. Per esempio, nascono uomini che amano la conoscenza più della moglie, più dei figli e addirittura più di se stessi." (p. 122)

("Now I'll tell you a story," she said. And she began:

"When the world was created and the seeds of all things were generated, the seed of knowledge was also created. It was made for the mind of man, which is not only called the most noble part but also that which distinguishes men from other living beings. But to say that the seed was made for the mind of man is not the same as to say that man is made for woman and woman for man. In the meeting of the seed of knowledge and the human mind, something threatening is produced."

The fisherman scratched his head.

"Why threatening?"

"Because thoughts are born from this encounter that have always disturbed the world. For example, men are born who love knowledge more than their wives, more than their children, and even more than themselves.")

Here again one might say that the text says more than the siren knows. While the siren explains that the structure of knowledge is not like that of heterosexuality—it is not the same to say that the seed of knowledge is made for the mind of man and man is made for woman—the language of the passage reasserts their similarity, for both are reproductive structures: thoughts and men are equally “born” of the encounter. The siren’s denial of the analogy is a first attempt at neutralization, and neutering, of the figure of the sirens itself, and others follow. Curiously, the characters who wonder about the gendering of the figure are both male: the fisherman and Celestina’s companion Marco. The fisherman asks why the sirens are women, and we get an equivocation:

“Ma perchè sono femmine?”

“E perchè gli angeli sono maschi?”

“Ma non sono maschi, sono angeli, non hanno sesso e sono puri spiriti.”

Lei l’osservò cautamente, nel caso la domanda di lui fosse un trabocchetto, ma il pescatore non dava segno di sospettare nulla sul conto di lei e appariva soltanto meditabondo. Allora disse:

“Forse anche loro sono come gli angeli. Bisognerebbe frugare in un lontanissimo passato e conoscere la storia degli uomini e delle donne dal principio per capire le ragioni.” (p. 124)

(“But why are they female?”

“And why are angels male?”

“But they’re not male, they’re angels, they have no sex and are pure spirits.”

She observed him cautiously, in case his question were a trap, but the fisherman gave no sign of suspecting her and seemed merely pensive. Then she said:

“Perhaps they too are like angels. One would need to rummage about in the distant past and know the history of men and women from the beginning to understand the reasons.”)

The all-knowing siren has a momentary lapse here not only in her apparent ignorance of Christianity, perhaps excusable in a siren, but in her denial of what she knows to be her own history.<sup>15</sup> Within the fiction, of course, the denial is explicable as the siren’s attempt to conceal her true identity from the fisherman. But I would argue that the novel would like to offer that very same answer to the fisherman’s question, thus neutralizing the structure of knowledge of which the sirens are metaphor.

The question is asked again in the final chapter, this time by the scientist Marco:

“Non pare che nei nostri laghi lombardi ce ne sia traccia; sono fatti nordici quelli di pescatori che corrono incontro al loro destino

funesto. Per di più tu sei una donna. Ci sono mai stati casi di donne tentate dall'incantamento delle sirene?"

"Sono sempre stati gli uomini a scrivere e quindi a parlare di sè. Ma con Saffo e con Virginia Woolf come la mettiamo? Tra l'altro tutte e due con morte per acqua." (p. 165)

("There seems to be no trace of them in our Lombard lakes. They are Nordic things that concern fishermen who meet their tragic destiny. What's more, you're a woman. Have there ever been cases of women tempted by the spell of the sirens?")

"Men have always been the ones to write and therefore to be spoken about. But what about Sappho and Virginia Woolf? Among other things, both died by drowning.")

"Among other things": What is revealing about the exchange is that it lets us see how the logic of the metaphor should work. If a sexual seduction is the metaphor of an intellectual seduction, then the intellectual seduction of a woman knower will also be embodied as a sexual seduction, but now of a woman by women. Whatever else one might want to call it, this is no longer a heterosexual seduction, and of course the naming of Sappho and Virginia Woolf, whose more obvious link has to do with the isle of Lesbos and those named after it, is the sign of the text's knowledge of this. The text knows that by inserting Celestina into the structure of knowledge figured by the metaphor of the sirens it has created a scene of lesbian seduction.

It knows, yet all the same this is not something the text wants to acknowledge. If in the example of the Nordic siren the novel seems to want to neutralize the sexuation of the metaphor through outright denial, in the penultimate chapter the novel tries to neutralize it through internalization. The sirens are doubly internalized. First, the space they occupy is, in the final episode, no longer an external one as was the case in their relations to man. The sirens were outside men and occupied traditionally "feminine" spaces: an island, the sea, a grotto in the case of Basilio the artist. In the case of the fisherman, the siren appeared from an unknown outside to which she returned once the ice had melted. But in the case of Celestina, the sirens appear inside, both in her love for scholarship and in her "seduction" by creative writing. The immobility that is the sign of their approach and surrounds their space is first felt in the library—"Concetti e idee ondeggiavano senza fine da un libro all'altro, da un incunabolo a una cinquecentina a una stampa del Settecento; un gran movimento nell'immobilità della sala riservata" (pp. 140–41) (Concepts and ideas undulated endlessly from one book to another, from an incunabulum to a book printed in the sixteenth century to an eighteenth century print; a great movement in the immobility of the reserved reading room)—and its books, "a portata di mano con seduzioni e veleni" (p. 139) (ready at hand with their seductions and poisons). One might expect, then, that the sirens of creative

writing would appear topographically outside, but they do so only in order to be re-internalized, as a disembodied voice within her. What was for the male victims the lure of the “ignoto” (unknown) is for Celestina represented as the voice of the “sconosciuta” (unknown woman):

Veramente la metafora della voce interiore, una sorta di somnesso canto di sirena, rende bene perché ora lei consideri incompiuto e imperfetto il suo passato. Restando in metafora, la voce è sì seducente. . . . Chi c'era dentro più scaltro di lei? Lei era alla sua scrivania con un bel maglione grigio blu, penna in mano, ma non sapeva realizzare quello che una sconosciuta aveva ideato muovendosi nei labirinti della sua sostanza grigia. (pp. 163 and 175)

(Truly the metaphor of the internal voice, a sort of muffled siren's song, is fitting so that now she considers her past unfinished and imperfect. Sticking with the metaphor, the voice is, yes, seductive. . . . Who was inside her, more clever than she herself? She was at her desk wearing a nice blue sweater, pen in hand, but she couldn't make concrete what an unknown woman had come up with, moving in the labyrinths of her grey matter.)

The internalization of the “sconosciuta” allows her to internalize the siren and neutralize the threat that the external one might pose. What was previously a dramatic seduction taking place on the high seas has now become an internal conflict, one part of the self moving independently of the other. It is a familiar enough move, one motivated by a logic according to which, to paraphrase Eve Sedgwick writing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not everyone has a lover of the same sex but everyone has a self of the same sex.<sup>16</sup> There is but a trace of the temptation to understand this as a self-seduction, present metonymically in the name of the only other woman writer named in the text: Emily Dickinson, whose poetry has been understood as autoerotic. It would be more accurate to say, however, that through this neutralization and internalization the Celestina chapter effectively kills the metaphor of the sirens, and it does so precisely at the moment when it announces that it remains “within metaphor.” The sirens are now merely an internal voice, a part of the self in conflict with another part. Corti attempts to disembody the metaphor and discard its sexualized appearance—the heterosexual staging of the seduction of the senses—and yet maintain a supposedly neuter, spiritualized essence—the seduction of the intellect. But the sexualization of the metaphor, and of the structure of knowledge for which it stands, is no accident added secondarily, no superficial appearance that hides a neuter and neutral essence. That sexualization is, as we saw at the beginning of this essay, included monstrously in the founding of the neuter universal subject himself. Quite unintentionally, Corti has slain a two-

headed monster, for in eliminating the sexualization she has eliminated the possibility of neutrality as well. No metaphor and no structure of knowledge are left.

This is not, however, a crime for which the text wants to take responsibility. Symptomatic are the insistence that the internal voice indeed remains “within metaphor” and the appearance in the *Celestina* chapter of a series of banal and outmoded oppositions—city versus country, science versus the humanities, academic versus creative writing—that might be understood as covering over that other set of oppositions more obviously at stake in the chapter, namely that between “man” and “woman.” Indeed, the oppositions are put to work in the final dialogue among now very postmodern sirens, who announce the death of metaphor and attribute its murder to science (which, by association with the figure of Marco in the *Celestina* chapter, can be said to be gendered male). A crime will be committed by science, by the atom bomb, they announce, and the crime will be the murder of metaphor.

“Sembrerà un giorno di quiete, il sole spunterà senza incertezze a disegnare il mondo. E se d’un tratto saltassero tutti in aria per una bomba atomica? La vita precipiterebbe nel nulla e sul mondo calerebbe l’immobilità. Il nostro compito sarebbe finito” disse la cantatrice. “Gli uomini avrebbero scelto con le proprie mani quanto il destino ha loro assegnato in precedenza.”

“Torneremmo ad accompagnare le anime dei morti nell’Ade, come secondo alcuni abbiamo già fatto.”

“Quali morti? Non ci saranno più morti e non ci saranno più sirene a guidare le menti lontano. Morte anche le metafore.” (pp. 187–88)

(“It will seem a quiet day, the sun will come up confidently to light the world. And if suddenly everything should be blown up by an atomic bomb? Life would fall into nothingness and immobility would descend upon the world. Our task would be over,” said the singer. “Men will have chosen with their own hands what destiny had in store for them.”)

“We would go back to accompanying the souls of the dead to Hades, as some say we used to do.”

“What dead? There will be no more dead and no more sirens to guide minds faraway. Dead will be metaphors as well.”)

This apocalyptic (and oddly obsolete) scenario is surely a cover-up of what has already been accomplished by the *Celestina* chapter and by the attempt to insert a woman into the existing metaphorical structure. That insertion requires a good deal more than a tweak here, a bend there. Indeed, as we’ve seen, in order to be a woman writer and woman knower, *Celestina* must kill off the sirens as metaphor, kill them by obliterating their literal embodiment, depriving them of



an “appearance” and rendering them, as the Nordic siren put it, “pure spirits.” Yet a double bind (and perhaps a double crime) presents itself, for Corti’s text posits the sirens as metaphor of metaphor; they are for Celestina the figure for art as opposed to science, and therefore the figure for figuration itself. For Celestina, there can be no “art” without metaphor (where “art” is still a decidedly humanistic and idealist enterprise, the sensuous appearance of the ideal); the murder of metaphor therefore implies a murder of this art.

What are the consequences of this double murder? Literally, the text tells us, dead metaphors: “morte anche le metafore.” Here the text yet again says more than it knows, for the sirens as dead metaphor, or more properly speaking catachresis, make an appearance as well. If the internalized siren appears to Celestina above all in the idealized countryside, the sirens of dead metaphors appear to her in the din of the city:

A Milano invece si accettava quello che colpiva subito l’occhio e si subiva quello che colpiva l’orecchio, soprattutto le sirene delle ambulanze. Non era una situazione per mettersi a pensare, perciò ognuno si dirigeva in fretta dove doveva recarsi. Ma il pensare, a quando? (p. 147)

(In Milan instead you accepted what immediately hit the eye and you submitted yourself to whatever hit the ear, especially the ambulance sirens. It wasn’t a situation in which you could set to thinking, hence everyone hurried to their destination. But when would there be time for thinking?)

The novel presents these sirens as degraded, mechanical, non-metaphorical ones, whose assault on the senses precludes thought. In relation to the mythical sirens, these are surely anti-sirens. There is no seduction here. The bodies carried in an ambulance are not usually understood to be erotic ones (with the notable exceptions of those in J. G. Ballard’s novel and David Cronenberg’s film *Crash*), and one imagines that ear plugs rather than wax might be in order. And as catachreses for which no literal term exists, these sirens are impervious to the sort of reading that would discard the literal embodiment in order to gain access to a spiritualized figure.<sup>17</sup> Alarming rather than alluring, they pass unnoticed as homonymous with the sirens of myth. For the traditions, idealist and humanist, to which Corti’s novel belongs, it could not be otherwise.

Yet one could also read these sirens as the residue of the apocalypse and imagine a different fiction, one that would embrace them as announcing not a “dehumanized” city but rather a post-“human” and hence post-monstrous, world. One could imagine, for example, that a theoretical fiction like Donna Haraway’s cyborg would welcome their wailing.<sup>18</sup> From such a point of view, these sirens also sometimes accompany the dead, and the occupant of their ambulance might be imagined to be that neuter universal subject, and his humanistic notions of art.

Notes

1. See Adriana Cavarero, "Per una teoria della differenza sessuale," in *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, ed. Adriana Cavarero et al. (Milan: La tartaruga, 1987), pp. 43–79. On Diotima, see Renate Holub, "For the Record: The Non-Language of Italian-Feminist Philosophy," *Romance Language Annual* 1 (1990): 133–40; Renate Holub, "The Politics of Diotima," *Differentia* 6 (1990): 161–72; and Lucia Re, "Feminist Thought in Italy: Sexual Difference and the Question of Authority," *Michigan Romance Studies* 16 (1996): 61–86.
2. Were the present essay devoted to Cavarero in particular, it might take issue with the way in which her notion of the "absolute dual" limits the possibilities available for the thinking of genders and sexes. However, here I am primarily interested in the question of embodiment. I would also caution that Cavarero is clearly attempting to think of a duality that would not be oppositional.
3. I borrow the expression "monstrous feminine" from Barbara Creed's book of that title, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), as shorthand referring to the association between femininity and monstrosity. See also Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Rosi Braidotti, *Madri, mostri e macchine*, ed. Anna Maria Crispino (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1996). Aristotle's definition may be found in *On The Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953) 4:767b: "Males take after their father more than their mother, females after their mother. Some take after none of their kindred, although they take after some human being at any rate; others do not take after a human being in their appearance, but have gone so far that they resemble a monstrosity, and, for the matter of that, anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases, Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male."
4. See Grosz's lucid discussion in her *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 25–43. Irigaray's work informs the work of both Grosz and Cavarero.
5. For a discussion of the female monster, and the siren in particular, as a figure produced by phallogocentric discourse, see Adriana Cavarero's discussion of Ingeborg Bachmann's *Ondina in Corpo in figure: Filosofia e politica della corporeità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995), pp. 228–35.
6. See, above all, Nietzsche's "Preface to the Gay Science" (*The Gay Science, with a Prelude of Rhymes and Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1974]) and Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Eperons: les styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
7. I discuss several of these figurations in my *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 160–68. On Machiavelli's laundress, see also Juliana Schiesari's excellent essay, "Libidinal Economies: Machiavelli and Fortune's Rape," in *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. Valeria Finucci (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 169–83.

8. Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, p. 40.
9. All grapple with an "inside/outside model" and the difficulty of being at once inside and outside of the practices one contests. Elaine Showalter borrows the notion of a "wild zone" from anthropology in her "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985). Teresa de Lauretis borrows the notion of the "space-off" from film theory, in *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Joan Kelly's metaphor of "double vision" suggests that the feminist historian should read the situation of women from both inside and outside of patriarchal conventions, in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Luce Irigaray claims that women play so well with mimesis precisely because they always remain "elsewhere," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
10. See for example Cavarero's *Nonostante Platone* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991). On Irigaray's mimetic strategies, see Naomi Schor, "The Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," in *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 44–60, and Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991).
11. Dante brought them together most economically when, in *Purgatorio* 19, he produced the figure who appears first as the "femmina balba," then as "dolce serena," and then again, as the result of an unveiling, as the hag and her "ventre." Dante's siren is a figure for the seduction of the senses rather than the seduction of the intellect, but the overlapping of siren and enchantress-turned-hag already points to a difficulty that is inherent in the figure of the siren: how to keep the two seductions apart? If a (hetero)sexual seduction is the figure for the "seduction" of the intellect, is not one seduction always "contaminated" by the other? Their symmetrical relation would suggest as much. Enchantresses such as Circe or Armida lure their victims to an immersion in their bodies, represented as a feminization and a metamorphosis into an animal state; the sirens instead lure their victims to a disembodiment or, as Corti puts it, a "liberarsi del corpo," a liberation from the body that is figured as death.
12. Maria Corti, *Il canto delle sirene* (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), p. 11. All translations are my own. Page numbers are cited henceforth in the text.
13. The Neoplatonic "celestial sirens" represented not a carnal temptation but an intellectual seduction: the temptation of divine knowledge. I am grateful to Silvia Volterrani for bringing this to my attention. See Volterrani, "La seduzione di un mito" (Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1998). For literary histories of the sirens, see Siegfried de Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (New York: Garland, 1987), and Viva Tedesco, *Il canto delle Sirene: Il percorso di una metafora dal mondo greco al Novecento* (Castrovillari: Teda Edizioni, 1994).
14. Discussions of this question in the discipline of history have been particularly instructive. See, for example, Joan W. Scott, "Women's History and the Rewriting of History," in *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy*, ed. Christie Farnham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case" in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan W. Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

15. Her history, in Corti's telling and amassing of information about the sirens, does not however include the following twist: "The earliest Sirens are, to judge from their beards, preponderantly male, though the earliest of all, from Crete, is beardless and the question of sex is complicated by the fact that women could on occasion wear beards, like the priestess of the Pedasians." See John Pollard, *Seers, Shrines, and Sirens: The Greek Religious Revolution in the Sixth Century B.C.* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 137.
16. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
17. "Siren" is, according to the *O.E.D.*, the name given to an acoustical instrument, invented in 1819 by Cagniard de la Tour, that produced musical tones and was used to number the vibrations in any note; it was later applied to, still according to the *O.E.D.*, "an instrument, made on a similar principle but of a larger size, used on steamships for giving fog-signals, warnings, etc." The first recorded example of this usage is 1879.
18. See Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," in *Feminism and Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 220–33.

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